AFTER DINNER Conversation

Philosophy | Ethics Short Story Literary Magazine

FEB2025
ADC56

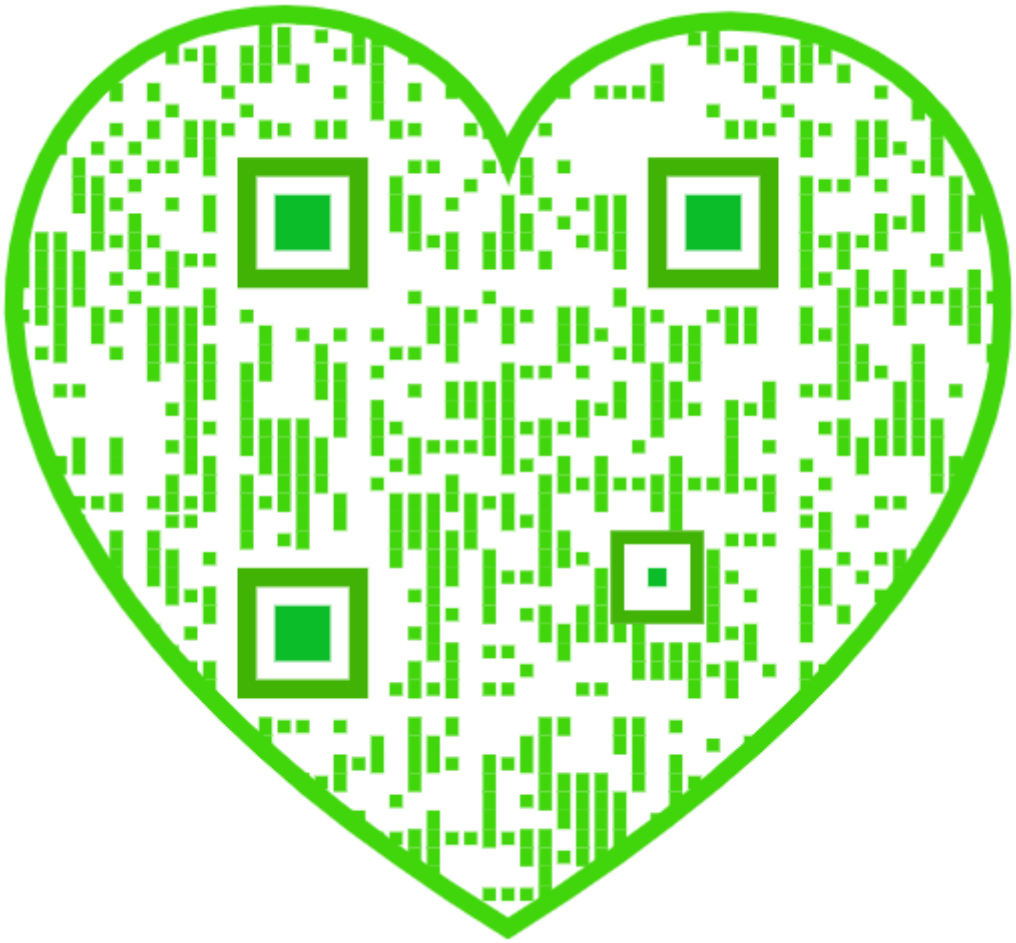
P.05 Does your motivation to do good matter?

P.13 To whom is a leader's first duty?

P.22 Do the elderly get a pass for their outdated views?

P.51 Who should decide when the sick get to die?

SEE MORE



After Dinner Conversation Magazine – February 2025

This magazine publishes fictional stories that explore ethical and philosophical questions in an informal manner. The purpose of these stories is to generate thoughtful discussion in an open and easily accessible manner.

Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The magazine is published monthly in print and electronic format.

All rights reserved. After Dinner Conversation Magazine is published by After Dinner Conversation, Inc., a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in the United States of America. No part of this magazine may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission from the publisher. Abstracts and brief quotations may be used without permission for citations, critical articles, or reviews. Contact the publisher at **info@afterdinnerconversation.com**.

ISSN# 2693-8359 Vol. 6, No. 2

.

Copyright © 2025 After Dinner Conversation ™
Editor in Chief: *Kolby Granville*
Story Editor: *R.K.H. Ndong*
Copy Editors: *Stephen Repsys & Kate Bocassi*
Cover Design: *Shawn Winchester*
Design, layout, and discussion questions by After Dinner Conversation.

https://www.afterdinnerconversation.com

After Dinner Conversation *is an independent nonprofit publisher. We believe in fostering meaningful discussions among friends, family, and students to enhance humanity through truth-seeking, reflection, and respectful debate. To achieve this, we publish philosophical and ethical short story fiction accompanied by discussion questions.*

Table Of Contents

FROM THE EDITOR ..... - 4 -

THE LIE AND THE CONFESSIONAL ..... - 5 -

THE KING AND I ..... - 13 -

THE LEVITATION OF MRS. CARUSO ..... - 22 -

BABY ALL GONE ..... - 51 -

GUINEA PIGS ..... - 68 -

FIDO SIDDHARTHA ..... - 87 -

THE FORTUNE TELLER ..... - 102 -

AUTHOR INFORMATION ..... - 121 -

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ..... - 123 -

SPECIAL THANKS ..... - 124 -

*** * ***

From the Editor

As I read these stories, I've been thinking about a metaphor I sometimes use. Imagine a five-pound hand weight you must always carry, every moment of every day, your entire life. It's not heavy, but you can never put it down, and you can never *quite* forget you are carrying it.

That mental weight is adulting. Or the responsibility of parenting. Or chronic depression. Or the soul-crushing traffic to your soul-crushing job that keeps a roof over your family's head that you can't quit. Or, with age, the ongoing pains in your body that make each movement hurt. It's the weight of being alive. The weight of the expulsion that came with the knowledge of good and evil.

And in this metaphor, if you were to put the weight down, the emotions that focused emotional control holds at bay would flood over you. I'm not sure what happens next, but I'm guessing a puddle of a person crying on the living room floor.

Many of these stories remind me of putting down, or picking up, my five-pound weight metaphor; of a weight that cannot be put down till death lest authentic emotions creep through.

I think sometimes about what it might be like to put down my own weight, and what might happen if I did, even for a few minutes. As you read these stories, perhaps ask yourself the same question if this idea seems relevant to your life as well.

Kolby Granville – Editor

The Lie and the Confessional

Marie H. Curran

* * *

Content Disclosure: None

* * *

It was the first morning in September and with it brought what the Irish call “back to school weather”—weather that after one week of solid, sideways splitting rain, suddenly mellows, giving way to a blue sky and a gentle breeze, which glides through leaf-rustling trees.

Below these chattering leaves, each long slender bough of each tree watched on as Alloysius slowly meandered her way along the desolate main street.

It was half an hour before rush hour, before black untarnished shoes made their way through steel gates and into newly appointed pews.

Walking through the silent courtyard of the adjacent churchyard and pausing over the perched graves on either side of her, Alloysius’s brain stewed, her mind convinced the trees

and their leaves were talking about her. Even those who once lay silent in their graves were sending word via the worms through the roots of unseen fungi and leaf matter into the upper crust of the world so the entire space surrounding her was saying the very same thing.

All of them calling her out, every molecule shouting, LIAR.

Clutching the large mahogany door and maneuvering herself through the open doorway with the help of her trusted walking stick, Alloysius felt her heart race, her mind—already spinning—began to pound and the one place that usually cloaked her in peace, like the unconditional love of a parent to a difficult child, suddenly screamed.

The church bellowed back at her as she lingered at a set of candles with flames dancing in the dim light streaming in through the stained glass windows.

Straightening herself, as though readying herself for an unseen battle, she made her way purposely toward the dark brown confessional box.

A place she hoped would reinstate the peace she had been craving for what seemed like an eternity.

Settling herself neatly on the small wooden stool beneath her ailing body, Alloysius waited anxiously in what smelled like a musky old room hindered by bad-smelling incense.

Pulling back the small window of the confessional box, the priest with a kind-sounding voice whispered, “And how long has it been since your last confession?”

Leaning toward the whisper, Alloysius answered, “It’s been one year, Father.”

“And what brings you here today?”

Shuffling her feet and leaning on her sturdy wooden walking stick, Alloysius leaned in even closer, clearing her throat and for the first time in her long life, stated the hidden truth she'd kept silent within the springs of her being. "I've been living a lie, Father."

More used to hearing children declare their three deadliest sins of chocolate eating during Lent, lie telling over unmade beds, and name calling of their teachers behind chalk-stained backs, the priest sat up, interested.

"And why is it you think you've lived this lie?" the priest asked curiously.

"I don't think it. I know it," said Alloysius adamantly, her voice raising ever so softly as she uttered the last two words of her statement.

As a long pause settled between them, and still unsure as to what misgivings were about to be shared, the priest pressed on.

"This, may I remind you, is a safe space. Whatever you say stays in this confession box; please continue…"

Taking a deep breath, Alloysius emptied her soul. "I turn ninety-two next week, and with illness invading my cells this past decade and death dancing her merry jig these last few months, I realize I must own up to the world and make peace with all I've done."

Clarifying, she continued, "You see, Father, I was born into an Ireland where the best a woman of my low social standards could hope for was to marry well and have healthy, happy children.

"My father died when I was thirteen years of age and no sooner was he buried, than I was pulled from school, a place I

loved, a place that loved me. As my teacher used to say to my mother, ‘She’ll become a book someday.’

“When I was pulled from the classroom, my mother sent me to work in the local dairy, helping sort the daily milk deliveries so I could bring a few shillings home to my worn-out mother. A mother desperate to keep her family fed and the roof above our heads paid for. A task the more arduous given my father’s passing.

“I was one of eight children in the house, and five of us were sent out to work immediately after my father’s death; the younger three were too young, and so they continued to enjoy the fruits of school, that is until they too were old enough to earn some money for the upkeep of our home.

“What my mother didn’t realize was that my teacher kept in touch with me after I left the classroom. Every few weeks on my milk run she’d pass me a new book to read as I passed her back the book I’d read out of my mother’s sight.

“I must make it clear, my mother wasn’t against learning, or school, she was the exact opposite, she understood the importance of reading and writing; it was just that she needed those of us who could work and earn a small wage, to do so. As she said, ‘We couldn’t live off fresh air with my father gone.’

“And with the passage of time and the aid of hindsight, I think it would have upset my mother deeply to know I was still yearning to learn, to know she couldn’t give me what I wanted. So, I never told her of this secret as I chewed down every vowel and syllable I could. My teacher was hopeful I’d find my way academically, hopeful I would pursue my dream to continue learning.

“Then, when I turned eighteen and my teacher moved on

to another parish, to another school, and my mother deemed me a grown woman, a local farmer, fifteen years my senior, was chosen and expected to court me and marry me.

"The thing is, I didn't want to be married; I didn't want to have children. I wanted to be educated; I wanted to travel. I wanted so much… I was so selfish."

Interrupting, the priest mused, "Wanting more in life is not selfish; most of us dream of having more than we have. Dreams can be a great way to escape the cruel truths of this world, the harshness of living. There's no harm in dreaming, in fact, I'd say dreaming is a necessary part of living. Like a silent angel, dreams coax us on, help us through difficult times and through difficult barriers. There's no harm in dreams at all."

"No harm until you act upon them."

"So, you acted on this impulse then?"

"I did, Father. I told my mother I would not court or marry this man and I left home the very next day, never to return as I was."

"And where did you go?"

"I spent the first four years in Dublin, and then I traveled, spending ten years in Zambia and the rest of my years in Sierra Leone, before returning here three years ago when my health declined dramatically."

"And did you fall out with your mother and family due to your decision-making?"

"Oh no. Nothing like that. They are all very proud of me. My mother, bless her, she boasted about me to everyone she met, right up until the day she died."

"I'm confused. Everyone seems happy in this story; I don't see the lie?"

"The lie is, I became a nun."

"You became a nun and served your time in the missionaries?"

"Yes, Father. I did"

"You lived a life of servitude, a life of meaning…"

"I lived a lie."

Cutting across her, the priest exclaimed, "I don't understand this lie you speak of; there is no lie to be seen in this tale!"

"But you must see it," Alloysius exclaimed. "I became a nun, Father. I became a nun because I wanted more in my life. Because I didn't want to marry and settle. Because I wanted to be educated, because I wanted to travel. And the only way I knew I could aspire to my dream was to join the nunhood.

"I joined not because of some burning bush or blind faith. I joined because I was selfish. Because I wanted a better life for myself, not for others… for myself."

Unsure as to how to react and still unsure if any sin had in fact occurred, the priest mustered, "I absolve you from your sin, and I beg you walk in peace and say three Hail Marys and one Our Father."

"That's it?"

"That's it! The way I see it, is you've helped people, you've made sacrifices; as to your motivation, that doesn't matter, what matters is the outcome. And the outcome of your life is obvious. You've done more than most would dream of doing in two or three lifetimes.

"And you must ask yourself if any good deed is ever done selflessly? Take the person who gives to charity and then speaks about their giving, as though a boastful badge, and the person

who gives up an hour of their time because of guilt? The motivation never matters, the doing is what matters and you've done so much for others. Please rest assured and please go in peace."

"Thank you, Father, but I don't think you still fully understand. I don't believe in God. I never did. I joined the nunhood because of my ambitions, not because of a calling."

Laughing, the priest said, "Callings. And what exactly are they then?"

Standing up from his stool and opening his door, he wished the nun goodbye.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. The priest tells the woman, “As to your motivation, that doesn’t matter.” Can you think of hypotheticals where the motivation for doing good does and doesn’t matter? What is the distinguishing difference between the two? What about in the case of the story?
2. Does the fact that the woman is a nun who doesn’t believe in God matter when weighing her actions? What if she did believe in God but only became a nun for the opportunities it provided her—would that be any different?
3. The priest asks if a “good deed is ever done selflessly.” What percentage of good deeds do you think are done for selfish reasons, even if it is only the selfish reason of feeling good about yourself for having done a good deed?
4. Does the time period the woman grew up in affect your opinion of her choice? What if she had made this same choice to become a nun, but society was such that she had other options for education and exploration?
5. How do you reconcile something being a “good deed” and not a simple transaction if the person doing the act benefits from it, either through a hope of future admission to heaven or a simple feeling of pride in having done the act?

* * *

The King and I

A. A. Kostas

* * *

Content Disclosure: Mild Violence

* * *

The other night I had a dream about a moral dilemma. Like all dreams, it began in the middle of the action, but somehow I knew the relevant backstory and it felt totally real. I rarely know when I am dreaming, and my dreams tend to be vivid, if slightly impressionistic.

In the dream, I was the king of a small but cherished land, a small hermit kingdom where I ruled as a benevolent master. My subjects, simple peasant folk, loved me and I loved them. I was fond of calling them "my children," and over the years I really began to think of them in this way. Because it wasn't a big country, I knew each and every one of them. I knew each family clan, I officiated every wedding, and I bequeathed a silver-dipped rose at each subject's funeral. I was a fatherly figure long before I even had my own children to care for.

But all that was years ago. Now I was salt-and-pepper gray

with permanent creases around my eyes. My sons and daughters had grown into images of my wife and myself, and they had started marrying and having their own children. I had become a grandfather several times over, and the boys and girls I had known as a youngster were now old-timers whom I commiserated with on my monthly tours of the kingdom. We reminisced about how much better the weather was in the days of our youth and how simple our forefathers' lives were. I was a father to all and a grandfather to a growing multitude.

My youngest son had reached maturity, and we had gathered for the traditional Feast of the Rising Sun to celebrate his entrance into adulthood. As usual, I surrendered my place of honor at the center of the dais to the birthday boy, and instead mingled with the commoners on the palace grounds—eating grilled meat and drinking the local brew and carousing genially until it was time for my speech. I never gave the speech. The words my secretary helped me write remained unopened in the breast pocket of my tunic.

As the moon began its rise above the elm trees, seventeen brigands rode up to the palace gates, silently slit the throats of my guards, then closed the gates behind them. In a matter of minutes, they had trapped most of the kingdom's population inside the palace grounds. I was unarmed except for a ceremonial dagger that had been chosen because the jeweled hilt matched the slippers my butler had selected. I knew the rest of the guests were in a similarly defenseless position.

The strangers were from a faraway land, though a few of them spoke our tongue well enough. They came to plunder and enslave; human bodies being the most valuable commodity there is. But they weren't savages, nor were they idiots. They

were experienced marauders following an established pattern of taking small nations and converting them into vassal states in service of their continent-spanning empire. As king, I was not to be deposed or even challenged. All they required was that I swear fealty to their empress and make the Choice.

A tenth of my subjects would be taken away as slaves, that was nonnegotiable and not part of the Choice. But a further tenth would be enslaved unless I allowed the brigands to sacrifice my youngest son to their gods. The Choice was explained to me as one of the strangers held a sword across my son's throat, the thin saber pressing against his smooth flesh and forming a blotchy indent on his skin.

I was entirely caught in their trap, and this was the point. The foreigners didn't want to replace me as leader, that would lead to a power vacuum and anarchy. They just needed to weaken me enough in the eyes of my subjects and family so that I could not be a threat. To allow my son to be sacrificed to their occult gods would break me, break my wife, and shatter the entire family. But to doom a further tenth of my kingdom, some four hundred souls, to a lifetime of enslavement in a cruel land just to spare my son? I would lose any esteem my countrymen held for me. I saw instantly how I would be perceived: as the despotic ruler who cared more for one life than for the good of his people, the weak man who didn't have the guts to make the hard choices. But then my son's eyes bored into me from across the dining hall. I had been standing silently, ensnared in dueling thoughts, and I could see that the very fact of my hesitation had damaged something between us. I wasn't a loving father he could trust, I was a functionary, a bureaucrat, wavering between two administrative options. Whatever bond we shared was

evaporating before my eyes as I weighed the value of his life against the freedom of four hundred others, as well as my own political survival.

Because that's what the whole exercise was, a political pincer movement designed to give me two impossible options. Once, long ago, when my uncle was conquering this land and subjugating the native people, I had fought with him in a pitched battle against a local lord. That army had cornered our forces in a narrow valley until our backs were up against a raging river. Our choice was to dive in and drown in the torrential waters or be hacked to pieces by the enemy. But my uncle created a third option where one seemingly didn't exist. Grasping the banner of our sacred eagle, he led a charge through the thinnest section of the enemy's gathering ranks, driving toward their leader and plunging his sword into the lord's breast even as he was cut down himself. Like the tip of an arrow, he carved a way out for the rest of us and destroyed the momentum of the enemy forces. We were victorious that day and my father took total control of these lands thereafter, my uncle immortalized as a selfless hero. So maybe there was another way out of this conundrum. A way by which an old man could save his son and save face at the same time…

"You can't sacrifice yourself instead of the boy," the chief brigand huffed at me, cutting off my thoughts before I had verbalized them. "Nor can anybody else. It's either the boy's life or another tenth for the slave wagons. You must make the Choice."

That's about when I woke up, my phone chiming the alarm. I spent the next few days pondering the dream and the dilemma it contained. I'm no ethicist or philosopher, but it

bothered me that I could dream up a quandary that I was unable to satisfactorily solve. That my own mind could not satiate the problem it had created. We were in Kyoto then, sightseeing between shrines and palaces and parks filled with tame deer. And for several nights I hoped to return to the dreamworld, to pick back up where I left off and discover the solution. But dreams don't work like that (at least mine don't). All I succeeded in doing was giving myself several restless nights of short half-dreams, all of them stressful and related to missing trains or running late for flights. Wasted dreams.

It wasn't until we were on the bullet train to Tokyo that I was able to return to the dream narrative. The soothing motion of the train and its rushing white noise sent me into a deep sleep within minutes. I was back at the celebration in the palace, the brigands before me with my son's life in their hands. What was I to do? Was one boy's life worth more than the enslavement of four hundred people? What kind of life would they have? Would it be worse or better than death? The scale was too finely balanced for me to choose, and yet lives and my political standing hung in the balance. What was the good of being king of a dreamland if my brain only used it to present me with impossible choices? What was the utility of grappling with this ethical exercise?

"Choose!" the brigands bellowed at me, swords drawn and spittle flying from their beards. "One life for four hundred? Or four hundred for one? The preservation of your bloodline, or the sanctity of your beloved people?" I looked around in a daze. I had other children and I had other subjects. But I couldn't be strictly utilitarian about the Choice; we were dealing with my own son and my own people. It wasn't an impersonal decision;

it was deeply relational.

I tried to think laterally, a trick an old tutor had taught me during rhetoric lessons. I was always a sucker for logic puzzles, word games, and the traps of semantics. But the tutor tried to break me out of my dialectic mode of thinking, of seeing things as they were presented instead of their underlying reality. My mind was often too rigid, like a stone road set through a grassy plain. The tutor taught me to think less like a road and more like a river delta, splitting my thoughts into fluid tendrils until the entire plain was waterlogged. I had to allow my mind to drift and spread until the way forward could be seen from a different perspective.

"We'll be able to see Mount Fuji soon." I was awoken by the voices of my traveling companions and zapped back to the real world, where I wasn't a king, I didn't have any children, and I'd never had a rhetoric tutor who taught me about lateral thinking. We couldn't see Mount Fuji from the bullet train (it was too cloudy), but I spent the rest of the journey in the warm glow of realizing that the solution to the Choice existed within me. Of course it did, because my mind had invented the entire scenario. If I was capable of outsmarting myself, what would that say about me?

That night, as I crawled across tatami mats toward a futon bed, I eagerly awaited the plunge back into the dream, but it never came. Night after night I waited and hoped for a return to the dream so I could figure out the solution to the Choice, but it was in vain. I resigned myself to the fact there was no going back and that there are mysteries within us that remain behind locked doors.

But on the plane ride out of Tokyo the next week, I

realized how ridiculous this was, so I began writing it all down, setting it out here for me and for you. I'm an adult with a reasonably sound mind, for God's sake. If I can't solve the riddles I create for myself, what hope have I got? I switched off the screen on the headrest in front of me and started thinking. I thought about courtrooms and trials and famous speeches. I thought about men and women being burned at the stake for crimes they didn't commit, refusing to recant their most sacred beliefs. I thought about a man who claimed he was the son of God, but who refused to answer the governor's questions at the climactic moment. And so, after more time than I care to admit, I arrived at the solution.

The answer to the Choice, the only way to evade the pincer trap set for the king who was me, was to refuse to participate. I had been caught in the logic puzzle as it was presented, and in doing so had unconsciously accepted the premise of the question: that I was the one who had to make the Choice. It played into my egotism, the dream of being a beloved king in a small land. Even though it was presented as a dilemma (two choices), there were always three options available to me:

1. Choose for a further tenth of my subjects to be enslaved.
2. Choose for my son to be sacrificed.
3. Refuse to choose.

I was so caught up in the internal logic of the Choice that I had failed to see the way out of the trap. To go back to the example of being surrounded by an enemy army with our backs to a river: the options weren't restricted to being killed by the soldiers, drowning in the river, or making a sacrificial charge against them. There was also the option to lay down our swords and surrender, putting the ball back in the enemy's court. What

would they do?

Refusing to choose is making a choice. My obsession with action, my self-centrism, my desire to be loved and adored, hadn't left me room to consider the third option. I was too concerned about what would be nobler: to sacrifice my youngest son for my people, or to sacrifice the freedom and well-being of my people for the life of my son? The answer was to stop pretending like I had any power at all. My kingdom had been taken captive and I had failed as a king and father. Surrender was the only real option. I had to choose not to choose.

I never got back to that dream, so I suppose somewhere, wherever it is that dreams happen, there exists a frozen scene of a selfish and self-aggrandizing king fretting over the Choice. But here in this world at least, I've found my answer.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. The narrator of the story decides the best choice is not to choose. Assuming that is what happened in the dream, what do you think would have happened next? Based on the results of refusing to choose, did the narrator make the best choice? Why or why not?
2. The narrator says, “But I couldn’t be strictly utilitarian about the Choice; we were dealing with my own son and my own people. It wasn’t an impersonal decision; it was deeply relational.” What does this mean, and do you agree? Who does the king have a deeper relationship with, his son or the people?
3. If you were in the situation of the narrator, what would you do and why? What are the factors you would take into account in your decision-making? Are there other reasonable decisions to be made besides yours or is yours the only reasonable answer?
4. Does a king have an obligation to be a good person or simply provide the greatest good for their people? Does this answer change depending on the form of government?
5. Is refusal to participate always the right answer when choosing between the lesser of two evils? What are examples where it is and is not, and what is the distinguishing feature between the two?

* * *

The Levitation of Mrs. Caruso

Lyon Kennedy

* * *

Content Disclosure: Refused by Author

* * *

The shadow of approaching sunset lingered behind the bay before slipping through the sliding door of 99 Battersea Avenue. It crept over a stolid walnut buffet, muted a persnickety red Persian carpet, and slid atop all four feet eleven inches and ninety pounds of Sylvia Caruso.

Every evening at the same time, though of course *not the same time* as she was reminded by the ship's clock on the mantel, dusk arrived. On occasion, it felt herky-jerky, like the curtain of a children's production, as she nodded off to sleep.

Above the buffet, a multicolored map of Italy hung; opposite, a shelf supporting the Virgin Mary, flanked by two smaller statues of Saint Joseph and Saint Robert.

Mrs. Caruso said her prayers in the morning, took the Eucharist weekdays when Sister Margaret came to visit, and

prayed in the evening before she had a little something to help her sleep. She preferred Frangelico or B&B but settled for sherry most nights because she didn't want her aides helping themselves to the good stuff once she nodded off.

Her first home health aide was a German lady, not too bossy, with that tic for cleaning so many of them have. Then there was a chubby smiling Jamaican lady who had spoken in such a thick accent she couldn't understand her much the first week. She was friendly, but Mrs. Caruso thought she took things home because they knew hardship and stealing from a nearly dead lady was barely stealing at all. After these two, others cycled in and out; there had been too many to recall.

She often looked back on the early days. A little girl from Naples, standing in line at the immigration office just before the war, her father's battered brown leather suitcase clasped in both hands.

Their hands moving over her, the creases in the men's slacks and women's blouses, the pinched pink faces, shuttling from station to station, older children scolding younger. Her aunt Dorotea at Battery Park, then walking countless blocks. The story of the fall—the loss of the great home on the Hudson, how times had gotten so tough; then an apartment. The word "apartment" hanging in the air like a sin confessed.

The explosive argument between sisters. Up the stairs to their Lower East Side tenement, her mother cursing her sister. *Bugiardo*. Liar.

After her father died in the war, her mother mourned, then remarried, and lived well enough in a row house in Newark. But years of stale bread from the baker, end cuts from the butcher, and callous glances from the rich had convinced

her mother things would never get much better.

* * *

Things improved for her daughter; presently Mrs. Caruso grew bored of the panorama from her million-dollar home overlooking the bay in Margate. Her Anthony had treasured the town and the proximity to Atlantic City for so long. So, when they wanted to downsize from their home in Hamilton, she didn't protest.

How she missed him! Even talking with his mouth full or resting his hairy forearm on the table when eating, and his disinterest in reading anything beyond an auto or fishing magazine. She felt almost embarrassed at the warmth these memories kindled in her.

And how he had worked! He began at eight, distributing newspapers. At thirteen, he sold shoes after school and weekends. By fifteen, he was an apprentice to the Italian shoe repairman. Soon he began to dream of opening a new kind of store, combining shoe sales and repair.

It opened a year after they married. Hamilton Shoes sold new shoes up front and repaired shoes in the back. He added uniform shoes and became the sole source for Catholic schools in the diocese of Trenton (his uncle was a monsignor), the Trenton police (his cousin was a captain), and Trenton firemen (his brother was a commissioner).

She taught third grade at the same public school down the street for twenty-four years. They were never rich, but they managed to raise three sons and weather the economic downturns together while considering debt nearly a sin.

On the first Friday of every month, for as long as she could remember, Anthony drove to Amici Milano, a restaurant

in the Chambersburg section of Trenton, for lunch with his "financial advisor." She didn't know what that meant; what was wrong with his accountant? Once she even suspected him of having an affair.

Before he sold the store, he sat down at the kitchen table with a stack of papers and a broad smile to explain that he'd saved fifteen percent of his income over forty years in municipal bonds as well as blue chip stocks like Ford and GE.

Almost a million dollars.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, you think we'd live forever?!" she asked.

"I just wanted to pad the nest a bit," he explained.

Two years after moving into their new shore home, she found him face down in the front garden after a massive heart attack.

* * *

This morning, she had awakened to the "QUAW, QUAW!" of a pair of seagulls on the deck. Then the awful sulfurous odor of the marsh. But she would neither shoo the birds nor close the windows.

Her back door remained unlocked so aides could come and go. Mid-morning, a knock on the door.

"It's unlocked!" she called.

A young handsome man who looked Asian or Latin, she couldn't tell which, stood smiling.

"Hi, Mrs. Caruso," he said.

She narrowed her eyes, then looked away, then looked back. "Who are you? The grim reaper?"

"No, I'm Jeremy, your home health aide."

"Oh."

"How are you feeling? "

"Like someone on death's door," she said.

"Well, I'm going to check some vitals, then we'll get you out of bed, okay?"

"Why? Who says I want to get out of bed?"

"It'll be good for you, Mrs. Caruso."

She looked at the ceiling. "Humph. Good for me… What are you, twenty-four years old?"

"No, I'm almost thirty. I'll be thirty soon. This September."

"Oh, that's my month. The nineteenth."

"Oh, that's mine too!" he said, patting the bedside as an exclamation.

"Well, we have *something* in common," Mrs. Caruso said.

"Oh, I'm sure we've got a lot in common. We're the same sign."

"You don't like girls, do you?" she asked as he measured her blood pressure.

"What was that, Mrs. Caruso?"

"Oh, never mind," she replied.

He then checked her body for sores, then moved her arms and legs to stimulate circulation, before sitting down to read a book while she dozed off. She heard some noises and awoke to find him cleaning the sliding doors that looked out on the bay.

"You a neat freak?" she asked.

"Oh, hey. No, sometimes I just… get bored."

He asked her if she'd like him to get her something and she asked for the Bible.

Shortly after he left, her weekday helper Dolores arrived.

* * *

Sylvia Caruso's greatest fear in life was losing her mind, and thus her control, and becoming victim to the thugs who would burst in to find her drooling and jabbering and proceed to rob her of the ten thousand dollars in the shoebox under the upstairs bed before clubbing her over the head.

On the same day she had the hospital bed set up, she made them mount a phone on the wall beside her; if something happened now, she'd click one button for 911 and scream bloody murder.

Then again, she knew if she lost her mind, she wouldn't much care what happened to her. But her three sons would care, and she wouldn't want them to find her like that.

She awoke to the pale morning light arcing over the bay and sighed on finding herself still alive. The breeze blew the rank marsh inside. Worse, a deer fly buzzed along the inside of the sliding door. Better a hypodermic needle than a bite from that!

After Dolores arrived, Mrs. Caruso pleaded with her to kill it. Then, she told Delores to grab the swatter from the kitchen closet, but Dolores yanked a hand towel lying on the table and slapped it against the window. The fly fell to the ground. She smiled as she picked it up by a wing and walked it to the toilet.

"Don't forget, wash your hands!" Mrs. Caruso shouted.

"I will," Dolores replied.

She was relieved to see Dolores bring her favorite breakfast. Oatmeal with fresh fruit, this time both bananas and strawberries.

"You washed your hands, didn't you?" Mrs. Caruso asked.

"Of course," Dolores replied.

After Dolores left, she remembered she hadn't asked what day it was. Thursday or Friday, she guessed. She came to loathe the weekends, as she suspected the weekend helpers envied the vacationers strolling by the house. If she could just stay in bed, she could hasten the end. *But I'll need to battle do-gooders like Jeremy. They want to sour every pleasant experience in life, even the unpleasant ones! Come to think of it, he's due soon and—*

"Hello, Mrs. Caruso!"

"My God, I didn't hear," she said, raising her head slightly.

"Oh, sorry. I knocked, but not loud. Didn't want to wake you," Jeremy explained.

"But you... oh, never mind. I just want to say, you're not getting me out of bed today. Okay? So, let's not discuss it anymore."

"Umm, Mrs. Caruso, it's on my checklist," he said, holding a clipboard in his hand.

"Well, it's not on my checklist. And I'm the customer. What happened to the customer always being right?"

"That's still true, Mrs. Caruso. You're always right, except when you harm yourself. I mean, if you want to die, I could give you an injection of sodium pentothal."

"You could do that?"

"No, Mrs. Caruso, I can't. And even if I could, I wouldn't do it."

She turned her head. He was not a simpleton. "Well, you're not a PT, and I want a PT."

"Actually, Mrs. Caruso, I'm studying to be a physical therapist. I graduate in December, as a matter of fact." He got on a knee to rummage through his large bag.

Her left hand tapped the railing. “Could you stop that? Calling me ‘Mrs. Caruso’? I get tired of that singsong.”

“Okay, what would you like me to call you?”

“How about Sylvia? Only my friends call me this, but I’ll give you permission anyway.”

“Sylvia, I like that,” he said.

She waited until he was finished with her blood pressure before speaking.

“What’s it like being homosexual?”

Jeremy laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“I just find it funny you ask. Most people don’t try. Too taboo.”

“Well, I’ll be gone soon. So, what’s to lose?”

“It’s not that different from what you had,” he answered, swinging the empty wheelchair in from the living room.

“Excuse me? I think it’s very different!”

Jeremy laughed and took a drink from a plastic bottle.

“I don’t mean physically. I mean companionship, warmth, being together, reassuring each other.”

“Oh,” she said.

She stared at the ceiling that had developed very fine cracks recently, though they seemed to fade in some light, which made her question whether they existed or not.

“So, you thought it was just physical?” he asked.

“I’m not certain... Before I landed here the ladies in my book club, well, I haven’t gone for months, but they talk, you know, like they’re so keen on it. Kind of silly. One can only imagine so much.”

“I agree, Sylvia. It’s hard for me to imagine having

relations with a woman."

"You've never touched a woman before?"

Jeremy shook his head and fastened the Velcro on his belt then reached out to pick up Mrs. Caruso.

"Wait! You trying to catch up with me?"

Jeremy shook his head and laughed loudly.

Mrs. Caruso had heard they were like this, else why would they be called gay?

"Sylvia, how long's it been since you've been on the deck? It's not hot right now."

"No. I'm not sitting out there. Stop being pushy. You can be gay, but not pushy."

"Okay, then how about we get up and you can show me around the house?"

She stared at him but didn't resist when he deposited her in the wheelchair.

"Later we're going to go over nutrition, okay? Make sure you're eating good things."

* * *

The doorbell rang and he pushed her to the front door. A tall woman in her fifties appeared, wearing navy slacks and a white blouse with a buttoned collar. She carried a black box the size of a toaster.

"I got up just in time, Sister Margaret," Mrs. Caruso said, smiling.

The woman kissed Mrs. Caruso on the cheek. "I'm delighted to see you up. It's been a while!"

"Well, I have this gentleman to thank," she said.

"Oh, hello," Sister Margaret said as they shook hands.

"Jeremy, could you give Sister Margaret and me a

minute?"

"Sure," he said, before stepping out and settling on the deck.

"Sister Margaret, he's homosexual!" Mrs. Caruso whispered.

"Okay," Sister said.

Mrs. Caruso leaned back in her chair. "'Okay?' That's it? What if he… I mean, he's open; he admits it!"

Sister Margaret smiled and sat down, then smoothed Mrs. Caruso's hand.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about, Mrs. Caruso."

"Sister! I asked him and he admitted to it, just like that. I mean, no shame, no fibbing, right out, 'bam!'"

"Well, it's changed over the years. More feel like they don't have to hide this."

"Sister, the church? Where are the rules anymore?"

"It's true the church doesn't condone homosexuality, Mrs. Caruso. But I don't think you have anything to fear, even if his chosen lifestyle isn't what we believe."

Mrs. Caruso pointed.

"That's it! It's a choice, isn't it? I told my book club that, but they shouted me down. Said that's been disproved. Well, what's good for the church is good enough for me, that's all I can say, Sister. Some of those club ladies, why some of them never go to church. *Humanists,* they say. Just another name for being wishy-washy and weak! You can see what Hitler did to humanists! He killed my father!"

"Yes, you told me that. I'm sorry."

"They weren't crazy about being gay either. Why he

stuffed them in the ovens along with everyone else he hated!"

Sister smiled and patted Mrs. Caruso's hand before leaning over and unfastening the box that contained the chalice. After the liturgy, she presented the host to Mrs. Caruso, then placed the chalice back in the box.

"You know, not too long ago, I wasn't able to give out the Eucharist. The church saw an expanding need for this kind of ministry, so they changed the rules."

"Well, Sister, I don't think the church changes to please some special groups who yell louder than others. If only the politi—oh, never mind."

Sister held Mrs. Caruso's hand as they prayed the Hail Mary and Our Father, then kissed her on the forehead and departed.

Jeremy opened the sliding doors and smiled.

"Why are you always smiling? Everything in your life can't be that good, can it?"

"Sylvia, I've been smiling since I was on my mother's lap."

She thought to say *Maybe you sat there too long*, but let it go.

She wheeled in front of the large living room television but then decided against it. She sat staring at the black screen until Jeremy grabbed the remote from the shelf.

"Don't turn it on," she said.

"Okay, I just thought you might want to watch. Is there anything I can get you?"

She shook her head but began to seethe as he walked away. *Everything was rolling along as planned without too much pain or discomfort. Then he arrives, pushing himself and his happy lifestyle on me. Of course, you can afford to be happy! You don't pay the bills like a father of three boys pays the bills. Or change diapers or do homework*

or anything parents must do. What a lie these people live!

"Everything okay, Sylvia?" Jeremy asked from the living room.

She closed her eyes and prayed for self-control, then opened them, thinking self-control be damned.

"I don't want you coming back here."

"Sure, Sylvia. Can you tell me why? Just in case they ask…"

"Well, I have a right to comfort in my own home, right?"

"Of course you do," he answered, placing a stethoscope back in his bag.

"I'm just not, not comfortable. Threatened, like forced into something. Well, I'm the customer and I'm not buying," she said, crossing her arms.

She looked over to him against her will and saw he was genuinely hurt.

"I'm sure if you were in my shoes, you'd feel… I don't mean, but this is my home."

"No need to explain, I won't come back. Would you like me to help you with anything before I leave?" he asked.

"No thank you. Please leave me as I am."

He nodded and closed the door behind him. She heard his car door close and felt relief, then guilt, then outrage. *Why should I feel badly in my own home? Don't I have a right to the kind of care I want in my own home?*

* * *

Monday morning, she awoke again to the "QUAW, QUAW!" of two seagulls on her deck. She wished she knew whether they were fighting or playing.

After breakfast, she called her son Stephen in Buffalo and asked him to find another care provider.

Around noon a door knock announced a middle-aged man with a beer gut and stubble. He was from Genesis Homecare, the "premiere provider" in the region. Mrs. Caruso made a note to admonish her son for not choosing this more expensive service in the first place.

The man pulled the Windsor chair to her bedside and began flipping through forms and asking questions.

"Can we just simplify this a little?" she asked.

"Uh, this is just standard intake procedure," he responded.

"I don't mean to be impolite, but could you *can* the procedure? I'm trying to get from point A to point B without getting my head bashed in. Can you help me do that?"

"That's our business, Mrs. Caruso. But until we understand…"

"Okay, okay, I give up; ask away. It's not like I have to attend a ball tonight."

"Thank you, Mrs. Caruso," he responded.

He didn't smile and had no sense of humor. A big company tinman! She hoped the helpers were better.

Tuesday morning, she was awakened by three loud bangs on the door. She pulled herself upright.

A large barrel-chested woman burst in, a large bag aloft on her shoulder.

"I'm Susan Wilson, Mrs. Caruso, and I'll be your home caregiver from now on," she said.

Thud! fell the bag to the floor.

"I hear you had another provider, so you're familiar with the whole routine," Susan Wilson said, rooting through her bag to pull out a stethoscope and blood pressure monitor.

"What's *Wilson*? Is that English?" Mrs. Caruso asked,

hoping to suppress the fear in her voice.

"Heinz fifty-seven, like most of this country nowadays. All right, so I studied your chart before I came over and I see no conditions that limit your mobility. So, I'm gonna take your blood pressure, then get you out into the wheelchair, and we'll see if we can't get you onto a walker soon."

"Are you out of your mind? I'm dying," she said.

Susan held out her arms. "All I know is what Bob Crane wrote down yesterday during intake. I'm just following procedure. If they told me to leave you in bed all day, I'd do that."

"You ever dropped a patient?" Mrs. Caruso asked.

"I'm stronger than some men I work with, Mrs. Caruso," she said, snapping the Velcro belt around her waist with military aplomb. "Your blood pressure looks good; let's get you up and out."

Before Mrs. Caruso could become afraid, she was deposited in the wheelchair, the woman's awful breath trailing in her wake. To the deck, then the kitchen and living room; her anxiety increased steadily. When she left, Mrs. Caruso thanked God she remained unharmed.

She rolled over in bed and dialed Stephen, who sounded groggy.

"What, did you just wake up?" she asked.

"No, Mom, just a nap. Big meal. What's up? How's the new service?"

"Oh my, I had the scare of my life today. They sent some bully over here; she tossed me around like a leaf in the wind!"

"Oh. You okay?"

"I'm terrified! Call them, get someone else!"

"Mom, they're probably closed now, but I'll leave a message, okay?"

"Oh, thank you! I thank God for your help every day."

"You're welcome, Mom."

Mrs. Caruso waited Wednesday morning for someone to appear. At midday, an attractive young lady arrived, and the routine began again. She was Italian and seemed neat and clean. She even agreed to leave her in bed. But an acrid scent wafted in through the screen door. A smoker! Emphysema had taken her mother too soon; smoking was one habit she had zero tolerance for. After the caregiver left, she called Stephen again.

The next to arrive was a young man with a rash and runny nose; he lasted two days. When she called Stephen, he told her they wouldn't let her switch again.

"Then get me back to the old service!"

She was relieved to see Beatrice again. She was neat and nice and wouldn't push her around like that last one. And she'd let her die in peace, thank God. *They know how to do that in Jamaica,* she thought, *not like here where everyone wants to live forever*.

An entire week passed in relative bliss. On the second week, Mrs. Caruso noticed her helper seemed down.

"Well, to tell you the truth Sylvia, my mother is dying right now. So, I may have to fly back to see her soon."

"That's terrible! I'm sorry to hear. How long, do you think?"

"No telling, Sylvia. Maybe two weeks, maybe longer. God's will, not mine."

That evening, Mrs. Caruso stared at the ceiling and fell into a widening chasm of despair. She couldn't take any more

surprises. She prayed and prayed and prayed to be taken that night until she seemed to float above her bed and her spirit soared.

She remained in this state for a long time, patiently waiting for the brilliant figures to appear. Yet when her eyes opened to the sunlight, nothing had changed; the despair overwhelmed her, and she cried loudly and openly. She even thought about falling out of bed, but that would be a grave sin even given the slim chance it was effective.

* * *

That morning seemed unusually bright; the sun lit up the kitchen and living room. The scent of the ocean wafted through the home.

She hadn't spoken to her two older boys in California in weeks, so she called. James, the corporate attorney, lived near San Francisco and Anthony Junior, the podiatrist, lived in San Diego. Then she spoke to their wives and got the latest on the kids, either in college or starting their careers. They all seemed headed for distinguished success. She lay back on the bed to take a nap until the weekend caregiver left; the night helper would be at the door in a minute.

But she couldn't relax; something niggled at her. In the past, she called all three sons in order, from oldest to youngest, from west coast to east. But she'd gotten away from checking up on her youngest, Stephen. He was still single with no kids at thirty-five; she couldn't understand why he didn't settle.

Her western sons were so busy, yet they managed to send flowers and baskets of fruit from the finer stores or even fly out and say hello when they had a conference nearby or a layover in transit to Europe.

But did they ever call just to ask about her?

Never!

And Stephen used to call regularly before she tuned him out. The more she reflected, the more she realized how she'd pulled back from him in favor of family news out west.

And he was the only one to help me when I was in need... How selfish I've been!

She grabbed the phone and called him; he was headed out to a restaurant.

"Oh, a big date?" she asked.

He laughed. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

"Thank you, Stephen. I hope you enjoy your meal."

She lay back and wondered again if she should ask him, but again she had no idea how she should approach it. If she said the wrong thing, she was afraid he'd become upset and possibly pull back from her, and she couldn't suffer that.

The next morning Stephen called and sounded in excellent spirits.

"You sound like you've just hit the jackpot or something. What's going on?" she asked.

"I was rushing last night, or I would've told you. I've got an offer to manage the entire food service at Carew's Taj Majal, Mom."

"Oh, I don't like Vegas. And Carew is such a blowhard!"

Stephen laughed. "Mom, not Vegas, in Atlantic City! You always hated Buffalo, now it looks like I'll be in the neighborhood again!"

"You mean you got a raise, and you're moving to the area?"

"A big-time raise, Mom. I'm putting my house on sale up

here. I've got a realtor in A.C. looking for a rental. I'll be there in two weeks. Great news, huh?"

"I'm very happy for you. And yes, it would be great to have a helper again. Too many weirdos."

When she hung up her mind battled conflicting thoughts. This might slow her departure, but she'd have a true helper, someone who'd be able to manage this crazy schedule and be around in an emergency. It was a godsend, and she prayed in gratitude.

Her mood improved; anxiety about who might appear and what might happen disappeared; her son was coming and would guide her into the next realm. She couldn't wait to see him.

But the more she thought about it, the more she paused. He looked okay at his father's funeral, but what if he'd changed for the worse? What if he moved in with someone? What if she wasn't okay with that someone?

She wondered whether she ought to call, but then he wasn't a slow one, no Carusos were. He'd sense her concern. He might back off.

* * *

A week later, Stephen called and said he'd arrive Wednesday to stay in Atlantic City and search for a new place. Sylvia insisted he save his money and stay with her.

On Monday, she shared the news with Beatrice.

"Well, I have to believe that comes from God because I'm being called away to Jamaica. I've got a ticket to fly on Friday, and I'm very sorry to be leaving you like this. But at least you have your son in the area."

"You've been very good to me, Beatrice. Do you need any

help with arrangements?"

"Oh, no, no, thank you. Everything's been arranged. The flight is booked, the bag is packed. I just have to tell the clients now and hope when I come back, I have a job."

"Does a young man named Jeremy still work for you?"

"Oh, sure Jeremy, he always busy. He going to school when not working. He was here?" she asked.

"For a short time, yes. He had a hard time not smiling."

"Oh yes, that's Jeremy all right, always smiling."

Wednesday, Mrs. Caruso awoke feeling much lighter. When Stephen called and said he'd be over about six that evening, she called Dolores and told her to take the day off.

The day dragged and dragged. She tried to distract herself, but something drew her back continuously to Stephen. When Beatrice left, she could hardly stay in bed and gripped the chrome bars to release tension.

She watched the minute hand on the ship's clock until it froze, and she had to pull away.

"Hi, Mom!"

He stood there in the flesh!

"Oh, Stephen! I must have fallen asleep. How are you?"

He was unshaven, but as handsome as ever. He had thick black eyebrows and a shrub of black hair, just like his dad. His lips were fuller and more sensual, more like his aunt than anyone else.

"I'm doing great. Got my big break, and moving here, it's all good, Mom. I can't believe it! You look like you lost twenty pounds since I saw you last."

"If you help get me up, I can make you something," she said.

"Oh, c'mon Mom. I'm a chef. How about I get you up and you watch me cook?"

"Just don't drop me," she said.

He pulled the wheelchair over and chuckled when she reminded him that all the homecare people wear a support belt. He hoisted her up and in the chair without much effort.

"My, you're as strong as ever. A nice lady would enjoy that," she said.

Stephen laughed. "Still trying to get me married, huh, Mom?"

"Well, it's a mother's duty. Can't rest until all their chicks have their own nests."

He pushed her to the middle of the kitchen floor facing the oven and began looking for utensils.

"I'm building a nice nest now, Mom," he replied, hand in the kitchen cabinet.

"I don't mean to pry… but you haven't given up on the right girl, have you?" she asked.

Stephen turned around and smiled at her, a spatula in his hand. "I've always enjoyed women, Mom. So, you want one of my famous omelets?"

"I'd love an omelet, thank you. I'm not saying that because your brothers are settled, I just think it's the best thing for a man, that's all."

"I hear you, Mom."

She could tell by the way his voice changed even with his back turned that he was uncomfortable, so she backed off.

What a treat to watch him cook! He sliced mushrooms and broccoli and cheese and offered her samples, just as she'd done for him as a child. His elbows jabbed, his hands shuttled

about, and his feet dashed like a dancer.

"So have you seen any places in Atlantic City yet?" she asked.

"Why I came down here," he answered, setting the table, then wheeling her over before sitting down.

She took a bite then looked at him. "It's delicious, thank you."

"Sure, Mom. Everything else okay?" he asked.

"Oh, absolutely. Just wonder how you're going to do. All alone in the big city," she said.

He chuckled and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. "Mom, Atlantic City is not a big city. New York is big. Even Buffalo. Atlantic City, it's casinos. As many tourists as residents. Though it's not like here where you only have them in the summer."

"You won't miss the snow up there?"

He laughed. "No, Mom, I won't miss the snow. I had a great job at Niagara. The best hotel. Now I'm ready for the next step."

"And Carew pays okay?"

"Best in the business. It's the biggest place in Atlantic City."

"Your father liked going there, but he thought it seedy. Too many people chasing too much easy money."

Stephen wiped his mouth with a napkin. "It's true, Mom, there are a lot of seedy places. But not where I am. And look, if you think about it, Hamilton had its seedy side too."

"But we never went there," she said.

"But Dad didn't exactly bar people from his store, right, if they came from a seedy neighborhood?"

She didn't answer, but loaded her fork with the last bit of egg and sat meditatively, which made Stephen uneasy.

"Mom, what was it that got you sick? I never heard what happened."

"Oh, Jesus, Mary. After your dad died, I was in the hospital, and I was in and out so much they put me in hospice. Basically a few months to live."

"Was it your heart?" he asked.

"The heart, the lungs, everything fell apart at the same time. I just, oh my, I just couldn't see dying in that hospital."

"But now you've been home almost six months, right? I mean, besides looking too thin, you look in good health, I—"

"Good health? Are you nuts? One fall and I'm gone! You don't know how close I was in that hospital. They were about to call you boys, but I told them, 'No, no, don't do that.' I wanted to go home and die in peace, without the machines and busybodies."

He got up and cleared the table and sat back down. Again, she reflected on how well he moved; he had not only been the most handsome son but also the most graceful.

"Can't get over how quiet it is around here," he said.

"Ha! It's a weekday. Just wait till the Shoobies come down from Philly and New York. Weekends here. Loaded with Shoobies."

She lowered her head and raised her finger in the air. "Now I'm afraid I've forgotten something. Stephen, can you please look at the calendar on the wall behind my bed? I think I just missed my doctor's appointment."

Stephen walked over and back. "Doctor Danforth tomorrow, nine-thirty?"

"Oh, my, yes, I completely forgot. I forgot to shower!" she said.

Stephen laughed. "What, you wheel yourself into the shower?" he asked.

"Oh, no, I just clean myself with a wash rag," she said anxiously, "but you can't be around. It's too embarrassing."

"No worries, Mom. I'm leaving early tomorrow. I brought a book a friend of mine wrote. Thought I'd just relax and read."

"A book from a friend?" she asked.

"Yeah, a cookbook. Modern French cooking; he's from Toulouse."

"A French chef? Friend of yours?"

Stephen laughed. "Yeah, Mom, in this business you have friends who are chefs. You expect race car drivers?"

She raised her eyebrows, then yawned. "Can you help me over? I'm getting tired."

He rolled her over and deposited her into bed, marveling at how light she'd become. But she ate well enough; more of that would fill her out in no time. He walked into the kitchen and poured a glass of milk and wondered who went shopping for her. When he came back, he was about to ask something, but he found her asleep.

* * *

Stephen awoke in the morning to a man's voice downstairs and looked at the clock: it was almost ten! He threw his pants and shirt on, then ran down the stairs, his bag banging the banister behind him. He crossed over to the bed, where he found his mother standing by her wheelchair.

"Mom, you're standing up!" he said.

She dropped back into the wheelchair as the doctor

extended his hand. “Your mother is very happy to see you,” he said.

“Likewise, here, doctor. I just got a job at Carew’s, so I’ll be living in the area now.”

Stephen placed his hand on his mother’s. “Mom, I’m running late, so I’ve got to go. I’ll call you later today, okay?”

His mother nodded and the doctor touched his arm.

“Would you have a minute?” he asked.

“Sure, of course,” Stephen responded as he walked outside.

The doctor closed the sliding door.

“You know what’s wrong with your mother?” the doctor asked.

“No, I’ve been meaning to ask, actually.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with your mother.”

Stephen dropped his bag and looked back inside. “But last night, she said her heart and lungs…”

“She believed it too. But she’s a perfectly healthy woman at her age. She’s only seventy-two years old. She suffered a broken heart when your dad died.”

Stephen put his hand to his forehead. He hadn’t known. “So, you think I can help?” he began.

“Absolutely. I can see by the color in her face and her smile that she feels better. Your moving to the area was the best thing for her.”

Stephen extended his hand. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Caruso didn’t like being excluded from the conversation. She pushed herself out of the wheelchair and crept slowly toward the kitchen, leaning against the wainscoting, then opened the fridge for milk. I’ll have to go out soon for food,

she thought, feeling a twinge of guilt about asking Dolores to shop for her.

She heard a door close and looked out to see Beatrice walking up the sidewalk, so she walked back and made it to the bedside as Beatrice walked in.

"Oh my, what happened?" Beatrice asked.

"Oh, I tried to reach for something and just slipped out of bed. Can you help me in?"

* * *

Alone in the evening, she eased herself out of bed and walked once around the first floor, then halfway around again till she stared at the carpeted stairway to the second floor. Her muscles were stiff, her joints sore. She didn't know if she had the strength to make it up and didn't want to try.

She turned and made it to the kitchen table and gathered a stack of mail that she began to sort. After separating the bills from the sales offers, she picked up *Anna Karenina* and opened it to the bookmarked page, but she'd forgotten the scene, so would have to backtrack to the beginning of the chapter. It had been so long. How she missed Tolstoy!

She looked up to see darkness slip in through the sliding door. It happened so quickly! She shuddered on realizing it was Lucifer, waiting to rob her of the last years of her life, and she had aided him! She felt the need to speak to Sister Margaret, to go to confession and mass. She found a wrinkled mass bulletin and wondered if she could risk church on Sunday.

She suddenly felt very tired but forced herself to walk to the back door to ensure it was locked. Then she lay back in bed.

* * *

Sunlight suffused the house when she awoke. She looked

at the clock: nearly ten!

Three knocks on the door, followed by a form: Jeremy! She closed her eyes.

"Hello Sylvia, sorry if I woke you. Beatrice asked me to cover… she couldn't find anyone. Is it okay for one day?" he asked.

"Yes, Jeremy, it's fine. But you don't have to get me out of bed, okay?"

"Okay. I'll just leave you be if that's what you want," he said, turning to open his bag on the floor. When he turned back, she was standing against the bed.

"Sylvia, how did you?"

"Well, since you've been gone, I've had PT, so I've been able to get some strength. Now I can walk to the bathroom."

Jeremy watched as she gingerly walked away, then closed the door. He heard the toilet flush, then the door close as she walked to the kitchen. "Want anything to eat, Jeremy?" she asked, pulling the refrigerator open.

"Oh my, Sylvia, here I thought you were at death's door, and to see—"

"I was."

"Oh, well it's great news. It's wonderful."

Mrs. Caruso looked out back to see her son approaching the door.

"Oh my, oh my," she said, reaching out for the bed.

"Mom! You okay?" Stephen asked.

Her hands gripped the rails and she introduced them.

"Stephen, thank you for stopping by, but I think Jeremy has to do all his things."

"Oh, gosh, it's okay," Jeremy said.

"Mom, I just looked at a place in the neighborhood. I'll go make something to eat. You hungry?" Stephen asked.

"Haven't eaten yet," she answered.

After eating, Stephen and his mother settled into the kitchen as Jeremy sat on the deck looking out at the bay.

"What time's he work till, Mom?" Stephen asked.

"Oh, till about four or five I think," she said.

"Well, how about I hang around? I can just send him home…"

His mother said that was a great idea, so he told Jeremy he could take off. As Jeremy turned to go, Stephen asked him, "By the way, do you know what's wrong with my mother?"

"Well, looks like she's better with you here. But I just think she was down. She lost her will to live."

Stephen nodded then shook Jeremy's hand and watched him drive off. A stab of guilt: a stranger had figured her out before me. Then again, she was no fool, never was. *Maybe if I'd come down more often…* but then again, she hadn't exactly been welcoming until recently.

Stephen opened the sliding door and found his mother standing in the middle of the floor, hands clasped in front.

"What did you think of him?" she asked.

"Seems like a nice kid," Stephen replied.

Mrs. Caruso shifted her weight. "Is that it?"

"Yeah, a nice kid. Very gay too."

"You noticed!" she said.

"Yeah, Mom. There are a lot of gay people in my business."

"Yes, I thought that when you first started!"

Stephen smiled and sat in the wheelchair.

"You were worried about me being gay?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I'm not gay, Mom. I'm a happy single guy with a lot of good gay friends, but I'm not gay."

"Oh, Jesus, Mary," she said and wobbled on her feet as Stephen reached out to hold her. "So maybe there's still a chance?"

Stephen laughed loudly. "Maybe I'm too much of a momma's boy to get married, Mom. Maybe I'll wait till I'm fifty."

"You better not wait too long! You won't be able to have kids if you wait too long."

"I promise, Mom, when I find the right one, I'll bring her around for your tests, okay?"

She looked at him severely then smiled. He offered his arm to her and walked her to the kitchen, where she sat and listened to him describe what he was going to make for lunch.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Mrs. Caruso requested Jeremy be replaced because he was gay and she didn't feel comfortable with him in her home. Does Mrs. Caruso have a right to have someone replaced for this reason?
2. To what extent is Mrs. Caruso a good or bad person in the way she treats others (*both her caregivers and her family*), and to what extent should she be graded on a curve given her age, life history, and the historical period she grew up in?
3. Mrs. Caruso was a schoolteacher who raised three children with a husband who saved and provided for her in retirement. To what extent can Mrs. Caruso argue she earned the retirement she is currently living with the beachside home and caregivers?
4. Is Mrs. Caruso a sympathetic character? What factors work for and against her being a sympathetic character? How do you choose to weigh each factor?
5. If her son Stephen were gay, do you think he should lie to his mother about it? Why or why not? Does Stephen have any right or obligation to educate his mother about more modern equality perspectives?

* * *

Baby All Gone

Dena Pruett

* * *

Content Disclosure: Death or Bereavement; Terminal Illness, Strong Language

* * *

If it had been anyone else, they might have said she needed Jesus. But the thing of it was Virginia Olivia Townson had had Jesus all these many years. And though the rest of her family moved seamlessly through the stages of grief in a series of coordinated efforts that sometimes felt contrived but worked nonetheless, Ginny, Mom, Aunt Virgie, Grannydear, or any of the other names she answered to in her life, worked backward and skipped a few along the way.

"I know I have had a good life—a good Christian life," she told those gathered around her hospice bed. "Thank you for coming." Instead of accepting a hug or kiss, she clasped each well-wisher's hand, giving it a tighter squeeze than necessary so that later they might comment on what quiet strength she displayed toward the end, or at least that's how her

granddaughter Tamsin saw it from her perch in the corner. After one too many hospital visits for heart disease, Grannydear, the doctors, and the rest of the family had agreed—it was time.

It was quite the production. Propped up on lace-edged pillows, Grannydear wore not the standard issue hospital gown, but a smart button-down matching pajama set in soft green and blue stripes. And though a few tendrils had found their way loose, her salt-and-pepper hair was caught up in a mostly tidy French twist. She had a full face of makeup with deep red lips and if there was a bit of a gray cast underneath, well, that was to be expected. She was dying, after all.

First the preachers had come to pray, then the women's church group, then the choir singing a four-piece choral arrangement that had only been missing the organ. After that, had been Granndydear's canasta group and her closest friends talking late into the night so it almost turned into a geriatric sleepover until the nurses shooed them out. A few nieces. One nephew. Two of her seven sisters as the others deemed it too far to travel. All that remained now was their core family: Tamsin, her mother, Aunt Poppy, Aunt Iris, and Grannydear.

Tamsin had been born into a house of women. Men, she learned at a young age, left. Whether it was from weakness of spirit, disappearing into the night never to be heard from again, or weakness of body, breaking down from too much booze, drugs, or fatty foods, they couldn't be depended on. The women in her family, however, were Amazons, though Grannydear called her daughters, Lily, Poppy, and Iris her "blooms." As for Tamsin, well, she was named because when she was born, she was Grannydear's "twin" with pale blue eyes and a thatch of dark curls. Tamsin Olivia Townson, or Tot to her closest family and

Tater Tot to idiots in her advanced math class, was deeply unsure of where she fit into all this and looked for every which way she could think of to escape.

With guests gone, they took up sentry along the walls. Aunts Poppy and Iris sat, backs straight on a blue-speckled loveseat in that easy-to-clean plastic hospitals favored. Tamsin perched on a doctor's stool in the corner, spinning around when the mood struck her. Her mother, Lily, sat at Grannydear's bedside patting her hand.

"Do you want me to put some music on?" asked Aunt Iris.

"Yes," said Grannydear. Aunt Iris put on some Perry Como. "No, dear, none of that. Please. Put on some gospel."

Grannydear leaned back against her pillows and closed her eyes, humming slightly.

"Can I go get a snack out of the vending machine, Mom?" Tamsin asked.

"No, you've just had one less than an hour ago."

"It's all junk food anyway, Tot," said Aunt Poppy. "You'll get fat."

"And diabetes," added Aunt Iris.

"I'm not going to get diabetes from one snack."

"That's just how it starts," she answered.

"Mom."

"I said no, Tamsin."

"Can't a body listen to their music in peace?" Grannydear gave a long stare to each one of them. "Now, y'all, get along."

They returned to the previous silence with Tamsin staring at the floor. They might have stayed like that for hours, but a nurse walked in asking to speak to her mom and aunts in the hallway. They followed the nurse in single file like a blonde-

haired, green-eyed paper doll chain. Copy after copy. Their looks were the only thing Tamsin really knew about her grandfather other than he was an alcoholic who had left the family when Aunt Poppy was five. His only redeeming qualities were a beautiful face and his height. All three of Grannydear's daughters stood at five foot nine inches, something Tamsin would only ever aspire to. Her own father had left nothing of an imprint on Tamsin, not even his name. He was no one special just like her grandad was no one special and if the aunts had ever had anyone special, they never bothered to bring them home. Each woman wore office-appropriate clothes in a mix of pressed blouse, skirt, and dress, composed and ready for a board meeting or their mother to croak.

Everything was discipline and order in their house with a side of love. A lady didn't overindulge, and one should always have just enough, which was why each woman was skinny. Food, much like drink, was to be regulated. Nothing to excess. It was all passed down from Grannydear. She still believed in dressing up when you went certain places—restaurants, hospitals, or to ride on a plane. Tamsin hated it. Today, she was dressed in a plaid knee skirt and white buttoned blouse like a Catholic schoolgirl even though she went to public school. Kids were predictably not cool about her being so very not cool. Instead of hating them for it, though, she loved her mom, grandmother, and aunts. They were a unit.

"Why don't you come sit here with me?" Grannydear asked once the others left the room.

Tamsin's stool clattered against the floor unevenly when she stood up. She took over her mom's spot and Grannydear held out her hand almost like a princess waiting for someone to

kiss it. Tamsin laced her fingers through Grannydear's fingers, turning their hands slightly. Her grandmother's hand was a gnarled nest of hard knots. Tamsin could trace the bulging blue line of her veins threatening to break the thin skin.

"Stop that, dear. It's too much." She waved her other hand around to indicate nonsense or movement or both.

Tamsin rested their hands on the bed.

"Have you done your homework for today?"

"Yes, ma'am. It was only one sheet."

"Practiced your violin?"

"Before we came here."

"You'll have to help out more, you know. Once I'm gone."

She seemed to be waiting for a response so Tamsin said, "Yes, ma'am" again.

"You'll go to college."

She wanted to point out she was only twelve, but her mom and aunts had already been pretty clear they just agree with whatever she said even when it stretched the bounds of reason like being sure to take a trip to Paris. Tour Europe. You won't get another chance. College sounded pretty reasonable in comparison.

"Make something of yourself."

"Yes, Grannydear."

"Help keep the family together."

Tamsin nodded, wondering when her mother was going to come back.

"And keep out those who might hurt us."

"Okay?"

"You heard?"

"Keep out those who might hurt us."

"You're a good girl."

Aunt Poppy, Aunt Iris, and her mother chose that moment to return. All three were rubbing their hands in the same way they did right before they all decided that Tamsin would be taking up the violin rather than the flute she had begged for.

"Mom," Aunt Iris said. "We need to talk to you."

"So," her mom drew the word out. "The nurse told us they'll send a social worker by soon, but we're only covered to stay in the hospital hospice for two more days. They feel you are strong enough to be moved either to a longer-term hospice or back home."

"Will our insurance cover that?" Grannydear asked. She looked at each of their faces. "I want to go home, then."

"It will be better," Tamsin's mom said. "You'll see. You'll be more comfortable. We'll all be much more comfortable."

***

They weren't comfortable. Any of them. The hospital bed had been too wide to fit down their narrow hallway, so the common room became Grannydear's bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom. She refused to leave her bed much less the house except for doctor's appointments even though she could have been pushed around in a wheelchair. Let a body die in peace, she said. They had all taken off work because it could be any day now or so the doctors had said. Tamsin's aunts and mother took turns making meals, emptying bed pans, and parsing out the endless chores.

It was like taking care of a newborn. A proud, stoic newborn. Tamsin was on hair and entertainment. She delighted in creating more and more complicated buns and braids in

Grannydear's hair though it had grown brittle from not having been fully washed in a tub. And on request, she pulled out her violin. She didn't know anything off the top of her head other than her scales, so she had to drag out a metal music stand and play mostly Christmas songs, which was all she really knew. She cringed at every screechy scratchy false note. Who would want all that racket while they were dying? It seemed like torture, but Grannydear clapped politely at the end of each song.

"That's coming along nicely."

When she wasn't tending to hair or violin, Tamsin kept mostly inside, which would have been fine, except it was summer. Her mom let her go to swim practice at the Y and that was that. They lectured her about germ safety. What if she introduced a new bug into the house? Grannydear's fragile immune system couldn't handle it. That concern evaporated once the food started streaming in on an endless conveyor belt of friends, neighbors, and random acquaintances Tamsin had never even heard of armed with barbecued meats, deviled eggs, sandwiches, veggie and fruit trays, pastas, and casseroles with cream of whatever in every bite.

"Don't forget to send Mrs. Ames a thank you note for her blueberry cinnamon bake," said Grannydear. "Remember Pastor Bob gave us that pan of chicken spaghetti. It was a little salty. Don't put that in the note. Bless his heart."

The bed was her command center, and she threw out directives and orders that ran the gamut from nail care to what she wanted to wear to her funeral.

"I want the pearls, not the pink. Those are gaudy. Get Ms. Polly to do my hair. She'll know what I'll like and what's best to bring out my natural blush."

Tamsin nodded as if she was taking notes, but she wasn't. She hoped someone else was paying attention. When her aunts and mom had limited her screen time and she tired of reading, Tamsin took to playing with her old baby doll. It was easy to zone out the hustle and bustle in the common room while brushing the doll's wild curly hair that never sat quite right. What did sit right and work perfectly every time, though, was the doll's magic spoon. It went in the jar empty and came out with a heaping spoonful of cherries. Tamsin remembered the box used to say something like "When she wants more, feed her sweet, scented cherries. Then feed her again!" And Tamsin did, again and again. It was all she could do since she had misplaced the accompanying milk bottle. She liked the click of the spoon in the jar and then again when she brought the spoon to the baby's mouth almost as much as the cloyingly sweet cherry smell.

"Aren't you too old for dolls?" asked the home health nurse who stopped in once a day to check in on Grannydear.

Tamsin shrugged.

"Where's your mom?"

She pointed to the kitchen.

In muted tones not muted nearly enough the nurse told her mom if Grannydear continued along the same path, they were going to have to do an audit. Her vitals were solid—too sick to continue living but too healthy to die.

"What happens if we fail the audit?" Tamsin's mom asked the nurse.

"Welp, usually, insurance is only interested in funding the people who are actually dying."

***

A month later, the food donations and well-wishers tapered off as they realized Grannydear wasn't going to have the good grace to die in a timely manner. They had to get back to their lives. How long could they all be expected to wait, anyway? Tamsin was glad. Like a quart of milk left out too long, Grannydear had turned sour and mean. She stopped asking to change clothes as much, refused to let them clean her.

"You all are just waiting for me to die so you can get on with your living in the world," Grannydear spit out the last word as if it was something unsavory now that she would no longer be a part of it. Their murmured protestations reached a crescendo of denial. They would miss her. There would be a hole in their lives. It did nothing to allay her. "Stop fussin' with my damn hair, Tamsin. Ain't nobody coming anyhow."

"We should call the nurse," said Aunt Poppy. "She's agitated."

"They're not going to do all that much," said Aunt Iris.

"They already think she isn't quite worthy of hospice," said Tamsin's mom.

"She's breathing heavier," said Tamsin.

"I'm breathing fine, damnit. Let me out of here." Grannydear shoved her covers to the side and fell into the metal barrier of her hospital bed. She groaned as her legs began to give out beneath her.

"What are you doing?" They all rushed forward to grab Grannydear as she started a long slow slide to the floor. Tamsin was sandwiched under her aunts and mom and felt an elbow dig into her neck. She scrabbled out of the dog pile backward on her hands and feet.

"Ow, watch your nails," screamed Grannydear. "You've scratched me. I'm hurt." She began crying as they shoved her back onto the bed. "I'm hurt."

Now they were all breathing heavily.

"Call the damn nurse," huffed Aunt Poppy.

They argued until she got there. Grannydear needed more care. She needed to go back to the hospital. They all needed to go back to work, never mind the germs. Who was going to watch her? In between her mom and the aunts yelling, Grannydear continued to complain about her scratched arm that didn't have a scratch.

Tamsin ran into the bathroom and shut the door against their noise. She pulled down her pants and sat on the toilet. With her head cocked to listen for the nurse who had just arrived, Tamsin didn't really notice it at first, but when she looked down there was a gooey deep red blob on her underwear. She sucked in a breath and made a sound in her throat that sounded like a pale imitation of what Grannydear was doing out in the common room. No, she told herself. No. It's just a period. Not dying. Not an organ because it's too small. Reason your way through, Tamsin. That's what Grannydear always said, just reason it out. It's a period. Period.

In the fourth grade when William Garrison, that little weasel, had suggested her legs were too hairy, did she freak out? No. She came home and took her mom's razor and shaving cream and shaved her armpits and legs, only telling her mother after the deed was done. Upon the telling, her mother informed Tamsin she would now have to shave every day, always, to keep them that smooth. Whether it was the unfairness of it all, the sheer magnitude of the chore before her, or the misogyny she

couldn't yet name, Tamsin cried. She suspected this was that. She would just take care of it, then. She carefully folded a wad of toilet paper between her legs, held it in place with hand, and then waddled over to the sink. Underneath it, she found the bounty that could only exist in a house of women—three types of tampons and three styles of pads. She chose the pad that smelled of flowers and maneuvered the wings into place with little to no fuss. Feeling accomplished, she pulled her pants up.

"This is a comfort kit," the nurse was saying to her mom and aunts. "In it is some Roxanol, that's an oral liquid morphine. I'm going to show you how to administer it to the inside of her cheek. We'll start with just five milligrams for now."

"Will she get addicted?" asked Aunt Iris.

"Like she needs to worry about that now," said Aunt Poppy.

"No. And we'll work up from there as needed."

Tamsin walked over to Grannydear who was now calmly sitting up and alert in her bed, almost normal.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey is for horses. Use correct grammar, miss."

"Sorry. Guess what? I got my period."

"Congrats, baby girl," she said. Her mouth turned hard and grim as her eyes met her granddaughter's. "You're a woman now."

Tamsin took out the baby doll and sat cross-legged on the floor at the foot of Grannydear's bed out of her eyeline. She rubbed her fingers across the pink ruffled hem of its bloomers then placed the doll in the crux of her arm to feed her more cherries. She tapped the spoon into the jar until it clicked then tapped the spoon to the doll's mouth until it clicked once more.

Tap. Click. Tap. Click. Tap. Click. Above her, Grannydear nodded her head to the rhythm.

***

By late August, Grannydear decided she was no longer dying and she was fine, everything was fine, as if her weakening heart had rallied, making a miraculous recovery. She asked to be moved out of the hospital bed and back to her bedroom, insistent that she would be on her feet soon. They acquiesced to the request not because they agreed but because she kept pulling at her sheets and bedclothes until she had bared one or more swollen limbs and then a breast. It took two of them to redress her.

Once she was settled in her own bed, the screaming began, echoing through the house.

"I don't want to die. Please. I'm not ready. I'm scared. No. No. No! I don't want to die."

Her cries came so often that sometimes they didn't answer her when they were all home. It wasn't something they discussed but had clearly come to a silent agreement. If she fell quiet, they would pause, heads tilted toward Grannydear's bedroom. When the wailing commenced, they'd return to their individual tasks, vacuuming, dusting, paying bills. The walls of the house tightened around them.

"Help me. Please. Help me."

Tamsin was the first to give in. Grannydear sounded so pitiful, like a wounded animal. She pulled up a chair up next to the bed while her grandmother coughed and wheezed, sometimes holding up some tissue to catch the whitish-pink mucus that would form at the corners of her mouth.

"My heart is racing," she told Tamsin.

"Do you want me to get mom?"

"No, no. You do it. Please." She waved a hand over to the med cart that carried her comfort kit.

"I shouldn't."

"You should."

"I don't know."

"Just do it, Tamsin Olivia Townson. I won't be made to ask again."

She had watched her mom and aunts enough to know how to put the syringe in the vial, pull the plunger back and up, and then ease it into Grannydear's mouth. They had been giving her the same amount for the past week, too, just ten milligrams. She squeezed the tiny bit in, so tiny her grandmother didn't even have to swallow. The same sense of calm that came over her when she tapped the spoon of cherries into her doll's mouth. Tap. Click. Tap. Click.

"Thank you. Thank you. They don't come, you know. They don't care about me. My daughters hardly ever visit."

"They take care of you every day."

"No, no they don't. They don't love me. Just like their asshole father. No one loves me. Fuck 'em."

"We all love you very much, Grannydear," she gasped. But her grandmother didn't respond. She was already pushing her head back into the pillow and closing her eyes. Tamsin wondered if the tenderness she felt watching her sleep was the same mothers felt.

"Thank God," said her mother as she pushed her way into the room. She was looking down at Grannydear, who let out a soft whistle of a snore.

"She asked for some medicine," said Tamsin.

"Did you give her some? It's been four hours."

"I did." Tamsin tried not to beam.

"Only five milligrams, though, right?"

"Ye-as," Tamsin faltered. She searched her own memory, trying to rewind the moment as if she could go back and give the right dosage. She started to sweat.

"Good job. We trust you. You're growing up so fast. Let us know each time so we can keep on schedule with everyone else." Her mom played with her hair a minute and smiled. "I've got to get some stuff out of here while she's sleeping." She balanced a hamper on her hip and started throwing in dirty towels, not noticing her daughter was awash in her own criminal trial. Tamsin was guilty. She did it. Lock her away. She fretted for the next five hours until Grannydear woke up yelling once again—obviously still alive.

"What's that there in the corner behind you, girl?"

She turned around. "A chair?"

"No. Who is that man behind you? He's all in black. He doesn't have a face." She covered her own face with a hand. "He has no face." She screamed a bloodcurdling scream like she was in a haunted house that made Tamsin run from the room straight to her aunts and mother.

"She's seeing things. She's freaking me out."

"Just give her the next dose," Aunt Iris waved a dismissive hand from the dining room table, where she was playing solitaire.

"I don't want to."

"You got this," said her mom.

Tamsin clasped her baby doll to her chest, fully prepared to brandish it as a weapon if there really was a faceless man

somewhere. She turned on every light in the hall. She didn't know what she was expecting to find when she got to the room. When she opened the door, it was just Grannydear tucked into her bed, blinking at her like a bewildered deer. Her grandmother had always been a small woman and the heart disease had made her face puffy and soft. She looked delicate and slight.

"I'm tired."

"Me too," said Tamsin.

"Is it time for my medicine?"

"Yes."

"There are bats in my room."

Tamsin looked up at the white empty expanse of the ceiling.

"I don't like bats."

"There aren't any bats up there, Grannydear," she almost whispered it as if she were telling a child there was no Santa Claus.

"Of course, there are. Reason it out, Tot. Reason it out."

***

The day they buried Grannydear, Tamsin buried her baby doll with her jar of cherries in the yard. The cherry jar was full of much too many discarded syringes that she didn't know what to do with. Her mom and the aunts would ask questions. They were already wondering why there was an entire bottle of morphine missing and starting to point fingers at each other. Though an autopsy would have told them the cause of death, they decided to forego one as it was clearly heart disease. They just needed to reason it out like Tamsin had done—like Grannydear would have done.

Grannydear had asked for it the first time and if she didn't actually voice the words after that, well, that didn't mean she didn't want it, did it? Keep out those who might hurt us even if the one doing the hurting was one of them. It was better for her, for everyone. The house breathed again. Tamsin had to work a little in the beginning to convince her she had missed her dose and gave her a bit more here and there. But the sleepier she got, the more confused she got. And it was easy, so easy to draw up the liquid into the syringe and press it into the soft give of her cheek. As the amounts got bigger, her grandmother would suck at the syringe like a baby with a bottle or a spoon full of cherries. First ten milligrams every four hours then every two hours, reporting only every other dose to her mom and aunts.

Everyone commented on what an angel Tamsin was. How Grannydear seemed so settled and comfortable. She was finally ready. And wasn't it a kindness, a small kind of mercy, said the aunts, for her to die in her own bed? Her mother would only say she was glad her mother was finally at peace. Tamsin told everyone who would listen her grandmother had been such an invaluable role model and teacher, showing her the kind of woman she wanted to be.

The obituary read Virginia Olivia Townson, a lady to the very end, went to be with her Lord and Savior surrounded by an abundance of loved ones and friends. She passed peacefully without pain or suffering following a valiant battle with heart disease.

Anything else would have been unseemly.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. When Tamsin talks with Grannydear at the beginning of the story, she agrees to go to college; other family members agree to go to Europe. Do you think it is right to simply agree to a dying person's requests to make them more comfortable?
2. Did Tamsin do the right thing by progressively giving Grannydear increasing amounts of morphine? Should the women in the house have allowed Tamsin to administer morphine to Grannydear? Should the women in the house have been the ones to increase Grannydear's morphine until she died? If so, why didn't they?
3. If you knew that Grannydear might have made a partial recovery and lived, mostly bedbound, for several more years, what would your opinion be regarding the morphine?
4. In an ideal society with ideal medical guidelines, how should the entire process with Grannydear have gone? To the extent your own country doesn't meet those expectations, why doesn't it?
5. Grannydear's obituary portrays her in a very positive light, even though the story of her life (*and death*) is more complex. Should people be given idealized obituaries? What does society get and lose by doing this?

* * *

Guinea Pigs

Yvonne Lang

* * *

Content Disclosure: Mild Violence; Sexual Innuendo; Low Intensity, Mild Language

* * *

The explosion tipped Holly onto the floor where she lay, confused and disorientated. A siren was wailing, the incessant noise all-encompassing. She looked around, trying to place her bearings. It was cold and unfamiliar. Her arms shot up to cover herself as dust rained down, clouding the damp air. A voice came over a loudspeaker system between the howls of the siren.

"Evacuate to your nearest bunker immediately," a robotic voice repeated.

Everything shook again and a sprinkling of ceiling particles rained down on Holly as she curled into a ball and covered her head with her arms.

"They've only gone and added bloody bombs now. Christ. You ready to go, Holly?"

Holly lowered her arms and looked at the man standing

in the doorway. He was over six foot tall, broad-shouldered, a tattoo peeping out from the neck of his T-shirt and winding its way down his left arm. His chin was covered in stubble and he looked pissed off rather than scared. The most striking thing about him though was his leg. He was wearing a pair of khaki shorts showcasing that he had one muscular, tanned leg and one black, metallic leg. Holly had no idea how he knew her name.

The guy looked down at her with a raised eyebrow. “Do you remember who I am?” he shouted over the siren.

Holly shook her head.

“Do you know where you are?”

Holly shook her head again.

“I’m Brad. We’re mates while we’re stuck in this hellhole. We need to get to safety; your memory will come back soon. You must have woken up abruptly.”

Brad offered out a hand and pulled her to her feet.

“Closest bunker is an underground station three doors down today. Apparently, enough people didn’t make it when it was five doors down.”

Confused, Holly simply clung to his hand and followed.

Where’s your to-go pack?” Brad called to her over the racket as another explosion sounded and temporarily drowned out the alarms.

Holly had no idea what he was on about and the panicked look of confusion must have been plain to see.

“You really did get jolted awake today, didn’t you? Get dressed and I’ll find your bag.” He jabbed a finger toward a wardrobe. Holly ran to it, flung the doors open, and threw on clothes in a panic, not sure what she was dressing for.

“Obviously varying the to-go bags as well. I haven’t had

this variation applied," she heard Brad say as he picked up an orange rucksack. "Come on, gotta go!"

Brad swung the bag onto his left shoulder, it being a brightly colored twin for the otherwise identical black one hanging from his right shoulder.

They ran down the steps of a block of flats Holly didn't recognize. Some people were hammering at lift doors, despite a line of red crosses on the digital display above.

"No lifts. Not safe. They've been shut down. Use the stairs. Come on!" Brad barked at the people Holly presumed were her neighbors, ushering them on with his hands.

"Either of you guys got the latest fashion choice that is orange?"

A tall, lanky guy with floppy blonde hair appeared next to them as they jogged down the stairs.

"Holly has, not me. Her memories aren't back yet."

"Oh bummer. Hey Holly, I'm Todd. Sure you'll remember me soon. I'm pretty unforgettable!"

The guy laughed and offered her a cheeky wink before he strode ahead. "Here Mrs. Hitchen, I'll carry your bag and get Rocco."

He got a black rucksack an elderly lady was dragging out of the door of a ground-floor flat and also scooped up a cowering white dog with brown splodges.

"To the bunker!" he called out as they joined the throngs of people in the street all swarming toward a set of lights.

"Are the lights new?" Todd called back over his shoulder.

"Yep, that's a new variable. They're changing too much at once; how are they going to know which changes made the difference? Wonder why they're rushing?" Brad called back.

Todd shrugged, a difficult gesture with two backpacks on and a squirming dog in his arms. “Maybe they’re running out of time and have to let us out soon!”

Brad grunted a disagreement only Holly could hear. She still had no idea what was going on but allowed herself to be led down the stone steps.

Holly found herself in a brightly lit underground train station with crowds of people. Some cats were cowering in corners and a few dogs were barking away—their barks echoing. The sound of bombs was fainter down here. Todd escorted the older lady over to the benches and shifted a younger bloke off to make room for her. His tall frame was visible above everyone else. Holly had a niggle in her brain as memories fought to surface. Something about this was familiar.

“Any recollections yet?” Brad asked as he guided her by the elbow to a vacant spot near the tiled walls. He dropped their backpacks to the floor. “How’s your chest?” he continued.

Holly took a step back and folded her arms self-consciously over her breasts. Was he coming onto her? What was her relationship with this man she couldn’t remember? Brad was grabbing stuff out of their bags and looked up when she didn’t respond.

“Judging by your reaction to my second question, I have my answer to the first one. I meant your pain? You have a respiratory disorder and chronic pain. Your condition is one of the reasons why you volunteered for this program and why I carry your go bag.”

Holly unfolded her arms, feeling a blush color her face, but Todd appeared next to them before she could figure out an answer.

"Hey, guys. Is it snack and gossip time?" Todd asked, adding his backpack to the pile.

"Holly's memory's still not back," Brad told him as he sank to the floor.

"Oh, in that case, we're a couple and you're madly in love with me!" Todd nudged her as he offered another cheeky wink.

"Poor timing buddy. I just asked how her chest was and without her memory, it was taken the wrong way."

"Oops! Sorry, Holly. Yeah, he'll have meant your health. You really don't remember us buddying up on this program?"

Todd opened a can of soda, a little fizz escaping before he took a glug. Brad opened a crisp-like bag full of nuts and some strong spices. The smell poured out of the small, recently sealed bag and flooded up her nostrils. As soon as the smell hit her it triggered something and whatever had been guarding her memories collapsed as they came flooding to her conscience. This wasn't the first, wasn't even the tenth time she had hidden in this tunnel with these guys and Brad had eaten his smelly snack.

"I do now. Those damn stinking snacks are pretty unforgettable."

Holly wrinkled her nose and saw her companions grin when they realized she was back.

"They keep you going and your energy levels up." Brad offered her the bag.

Holly waved it away as Todd answered, "That justification hasn't worked in any of the previous simulations, so I don't know why you keep wheeling its sorry ass out."

Holly joined them on the floor and let her brain untangle everything that was flooding to the surface. She could suddenly

speak French and Arabic. She knew dates of battles. Could accurately draw and label a diagram of an engine. A tsunami of memories and facts hit, along with a terrifying realization.

"This isn't real, is it?" she asked.

"Welcome back online, Holly!" Todd offered his hand for a high five.

Holly slapped it, muscle memory overriding her scrambled brain.

"Almost back," she clarified. "Do I know engineering?"

The men both nodded.

"There was a lack of skills within the STEM field and there was still a severe underrepresentation of women, so you guys, sorry poor choice of words, were prioritized for those uploads," Todd answered.

Familiarity was returning to Holly. She remembered an overly white laboratory, lots of monitors and so many forms.

"Are we in a sleep test?"

"Kinda. We're the volunteers for the sleep education and training program. At first, it was just seeing if we could learn and retain skills while we slept," Brad began.

"And it worked. Superhumans here we come and bye-bye sky high tuition fees or years lost in the education system. Learn the theories behind various sciences. Have a batch of historically important dates and events downloaded into our brains while we sleep." Todd held his arms up in a mock champion pose.

"So what are we learning now?" Holly asked as she rubbed her forehead where a dull throbbing was keeping beat.

"How to survive," Todd answered.

"Survive what?" Holly asked.

Todd shrugged. "All sorts of disasters. They keep

tweaking them and see how many people die."

"We can die in here?" Holly exclaimed.

"No. The pain and terror would feel real, but you'd wake up as normal the next day—or should."

"Should?"

Brad took over. "It's the government that's learning currently. They're trying to make things safer for people in reality by using us volunteers to run various simulations to see what actions they can take, what instructions they can give, to maximize survival in a real-life emergency. Since we're not meant to remember any of this we're not supposed to be learning—just reacting each time. We remember though. We can see the changes and hold onto the trauma. The drug that wipes your memory clean has been failing with us. It's why we tend to stick together. If you didn't finish your sleep pattern, recall is mixed. Best we can figure is all of us at some point have been prescribed reclonfin. We think the previous use of that may stop whatever they use to reset everyone else."

"So we know we keep reliving this?" Holly clarified as more memories forced their way through.

Todd nodded. "Yep. So we notice the changes, speaking of which, I wonder what's with the orange bags?"

"Emergency supplies need to be easily identified. Bright colors will be easier to find in the dark and easier to spot by rescuers in the rubble. Probably experimenting to see if those with orange backpacks are more likely to be rescued following the explosion," Brad mused.

"Explosion?" Holly interrupted.

"Yeah, strap in Hol, a big one's about to hit and this tunnel's coming down. Shield your head and wait for the debris

to settle. Then dig your way toward the light. If you can't see any light or have gotten flipped around and don't know which way is which, try to do a long, slow spit. See which way it falls—then dig the opposite way to which gravity just dragged your drool," Brad advised.

"But we can't get hurt, right?" Holly checked, panic rising within.

"Well, you can feel the pain and emotions of what we're going through," Todd began telling her, he and Brad exchanging looks.

"And as well as remembering in our minds what we've been put through, our bodies are retaining some telltale signs—aches, pains, bruises. So, if you get shot you won't return the next day with a bullet wound, but there will be a mark and some tenderness where the simulated bullet hit you. This experiment's gone on too long and they can't keep resetting us consequence-free." Brad looked worn out as he relayed this.

"How long have we been doing this?" Holly whispered.

Brad didn't acknowledge she had spoken, but Todd replied, "We've been part of the program for six years. Reliving various disasters for close to four. But hey, we got off the ship okay and aced the burning building evacuation. Now we just have to graduate war." Todd offered a weak smile.

"Six years?" Holly exclaimed. She could now remember Brad and Todd in cold water, fumbling with life jackets with numb fingers, screaming about sharks. Then the crackling of flames, stinging smoke and Brad dragging her away in tears when they couldn't get a neighbor in a wheelchair out. Simulated or not, she had felt the fear and pain in those situations. That lady had felt the agony of burning to death.

"We've been in this hell for six years?" she repeated.

"Well technically, only four of them have been hellish," Todd quipped.

"Here it comes!" Brad shouted as he ducked and shielded his head.

There was a screeching sound before the missile made contact. The walls shook, stones began to rain down, cracks darted up the walls before they split as easily as an eggshell and collapsed onto the people below. Screams and dust filled the air. Holly's ears began ringing as debris fell onto her, pinning her down. She squeezed her eyes shut. She'd survived this before; she could do it again.

Holly woke up in the sparsely decorated flat of her sleep existence. She knew where she was and why she was here today. And what was coming. She was in her dream home—in the literal and most definitely not metaphorical sense. She threw off her duvet and smoothed down her gray Snoopy nightie. Holly grabbed a brush from her bedside table that she knew would be there—had been there every morning since they had been practicing this evacuation for five weeks and counting. Right next to her strawberry lip balm. She brushed her hair and made her way over to the kitchen to get a glass of water. She wondered how long they'd have to keep doing this. It had taken over two years to get off that awful ship. She could barely remember her real life anymore. She didn't think they were waking them up between reenactments anymore. They just kept them under and used them as guinea pigs in their simulations.

Holly drank some water and quickly checked over her body. There were old scars and marks dotted around but nothing new. She dressed quickly, tied her hair back, and

crammed a crumpet in her mouth. Then the evacuation alarm sounded. She gulped down the rest of her water, slicked on a dab of lip balm, threw on a coat, and grabbed her bag.

At least Holly knew what was happening this time. She put on some sturdy shoes, filled a water bottle, and strapped it into her orange rucksack. Her door flew open and Brad was there, dressed as he always was and looking at her expectantly.

"Woke up normally; I know what's going on," Holly answered.

"Brilliant. I've got orange as well today; it must have made a significant impact on survival if they've rolled out the change so quickly. Let's go."

He twisted to show off his matching rucksack and then they were off, moving with a crowd of people they knew. They had seen various members die, seen most injured, but had only faint recollections or fake memories of them. Brad guided people away from the lifts; Holly could now remember people had become trapped in lifts that had collapsed when bombs hit in previous simulations. So now all the lifts shut down as soon as the emergency siren sounded. It had mainly been a success except for the dangerously slow evacuation of the less mobile residents from the higher floors. A week or so later their neighbors' quarters had been rearranged. The elderly or disabled were now all on the ground floor. They had no idea their rooms had changed. Had no idea they didn't really live here and were forced to endure this attack repeatedly. She, Brad, and Todd did though.

As she thought of Todd his lanky frame loped into view, his orange backpack hanging at the average neighbors' head height. He waved at them.

"Remember me today?" he asked Holly.

"Hardly likely to forget you two days in a row, am I?"

These two people had fled death with her, held her hand as she was injured, and they had comforted each other as they witnessed more deaths than anyone should have to see in one lifetime. Yet she had never actually met them in real life.

"Hey, Mrs. Hitchen. Would you like me to carry your bag and Rosco for you?" Todd offered their neighbor.

Mrs. Hitchen looked confused as she pulled the orange bag toward him. "What's Rosco? Have I forgotten something?"

"Rosco, your dog?" Todd clarified.

Brad and Holly paused; this was new.

"Dog? I haven't any smuggled pets!" Mrs. Hitchen exclaimed, obviously upset at the suggestion.

The newly implanted information surged to the forefront of Holly's mind as she suddenly "remembered" pets were now banned. The government had said they wasted precious resources at a time of food, medicine, and energy rationing. Pets also made evacuations more difficult. Holly exchanged looks with Brad and Todd who had obviously also just "remembered" this too.

"Sorry, Mrs. Hitchen. My bad. I got confused in the panic," Todd apologized as he took her bag and offered his arm.

They began to hurry as another explosion made the entire building rock in its foundations. Holly fell quiet as they made their way to the underground station, even though she knew they would not be safe there.

The trio made their way to their usual spot in the bunker. Holly felt a tightness in her chest and was glad it was time to sit. As she gazed around at the pet-free crowd, she remembered

how excited she had been to be able to participate in this trial. Health conditions didn't exclude volunteers, they were actively encouraged, as the government was keen for a full representation of society for the simulations to be accurate. If only she'd known where it would lead.

Brad started opening his pack to dig out his disgusting-smelling snack.

"There has to be a way to request to leave this program?" Holly asked him as she glanced nervously up at the ceiling she knew was going to collapse soon. "I mean, they can't class us as volunteers anymore surely?"

Todd let his long frame slide down next to her, his knees jutting out.

"How do we speak to them? We only know what's happening when we're here and can't do anything. I think we're being kept under longer. It's getting where I can't remember much of my actual life," Todd answered as he rummaged for his drink.

"If we woke up suddenly, do you think we'd have some memories?" Holly asked him.

Todd shrugged. Brad answered, "Doubt it, if you wake suddenly in here your memory is worse, remember?"

"I was wondering if the reverse was true in reality. There has to be some way out?"

The conversation was cut short by the screech of a missile as it careened into the underground station they were sheltering in. Everyone screamed, surprised by the turn of events except for the weary trio who covered their heads and prepared for the collapse of the ceiling.

The pain was intense as the rocks rained down. The lights

failed and panicked screams echoed around the darkness between the rumbling of tumbling debris. Holly noticed the orange rucksacks had been improved—they now glowed in the dark. It looked like obese fireflies were crawling around the tunnel. She squeezed her eyes shut, reassuring herself this wasn't real, she'd definitely be waking up tomorrow. When she'd have to do it all over again. Pain seared through her as she was buried and she tried to keep track of which way was up.

Holly woke up and found herself back in her fake bed in her sparse flat. Here we go again, she thought. At least she knew where she was and why though. She leaped out of bed and grabbed the hairbrush from next to her lip balm on the bedside table. She dressed quickly and opened her flat door. The corridor was empty. Holly didn't really know her neighbors; she only saw them during the evacuation, rather than day-to-day living. She had a vague recollection of seeing neighbors walk past with dogs previously, but it looked like the pet ban had stuck.

Then Brad came into view and waved at her. "Morning," he greeted.

"Hey, you're early," Holly commented as she beckoned him in.

"Actually, the sirens are late. Wonder what they are experimenting with this time?"

"Probably seeing if people are more likely to survive a war if they're properly up, dressed, and had a chance for a coffee," Holly remarked as she went to put the kettle on.

"Good point, it is a significant variable to test. I'd back the team who were caffeinated in a war."

"Who do you think chose this furniture?" Holly

interrupted as she held up a cushion with an image of a squirrel on it.

"An algorithm. We filled in surveys about our taste and shared photos of our homes with the program coordinators so our living spaces could be designed to be believable. If participants don't believe this is reality, they won't behave honestly and the whole exercise becomes pointless."

It was weird, Brad standing in her home. Most, if not all, of her memories with him were high-pressure situations avoiding death or fighting for survival. Now she was making him coffee.

"Do you know where Todd lives?" she asked.

"No. Easy enough to find though." Brad wandered out into the corridor, then let out an ear-piercing whistle followed by a bellow. "Todd!"

"However did you come up with such a plan?" she asked sarcastically as Brad returned smiling and ignoring the shouts from angry neighbors.

"You didn't ask for smart ideas, you asked for Todd. Besides, it's not like the neighbors will remember this and hold a grudge." He held his hand out for coffee.

Todd suddenly appeared in her open door. "Well good morning my subtle friends. Any idea where our apocalyptic alarm clock is?"

"We reckon they're experimenting with different timed evacuations now," Brad answered as he made his way to Holly's couch.

"Nice place, Holly," Todd joked as he plonked himself down in an armchair.

"Thanks. I picked none of it myself and it doesn't exist in

reality."

"So no future career in interior design beckoning when we get out of here?"

"How will we get out of here?" Holly asked seriously.

"Yeah, this is our best chance to plan before the bombs start falling," Todd agreed.

"We have to find a way to remember this existence next time they actually allow us to wake up." Brad's eyes crinkled as he focused. "Maybe even a way to force ourselves to wake up."

Holly sat next to him. "Our memories are blocked by drugs so we could do with a physical reminder that sparks recognition," she suggested.

"You think a tattoo would stay rather than disappear like our injuries?" Todd asked.

"It would have to be something severe enough to scar, but subtle enough for the programmers not to notice," Holly thought aloud.

"Before we resort to a spot of self-mutilation on this so far lovely morning, it may be wise to take advantage of the fact that one of us has a limb we can write on without causing any pain," Todd proposed.

Brad was immediately on board. "What can we mark on my knee that will be significant enough to override memory repression drugs?"

They were quiet for a few beats.

"How about a symbol of a bough of holly?" Todd suggested.

"Todd, you make much more sense on mornings we don't first meet during evacuations." Brad laughed as he slapped him on the back. He then started opening drawers in the kitchen.

"Just going to take this knife to the bathroom, not sure how many cameras they have trained on us," Brad called as he breezed past them.

"I love the fact he thinks people who would make us reenact death and face terror every day would draw the moral line at watching us poop." Todd sighed.

Holly shuddered at the thought, before deciding to focus on the plan. "How can we make me more memorable? Are there any scents you associate with me? That awful snack you have was what jolted my memory back the other day!" Holly called.

Brad didn't reply until he was back in the room. "The only vaguely normal thing I associate with you would be a hint of strawberries."

Holly sprung up and applied such a thick layer of her strawberry lip balm it left her fingers tinted red. Then she grabbed Brad and pulled him into a kiss.

"Try to remember me!" she urged as the sirens sprang to life.

"Will do. Let's hope this jolts me awake and doesn't end me," he replied.

"How would a kiss end you?" Holly asked.

"Not that. What I'm about to do, testing the fact we can't die." Then he jogged to her window, climbed out, and leaped from her eighth-floor window.

Holly woke up to incessant beeping and angry shouting. She panicked; if she'd woken abruptly, she'd lose her memory. Her racing mind paused to consider the fact she was aware of memory loss risk proved she couldn't possibly be losing her memory. Then her mind started to feel foggy as she wondered what awful dream had scared her so much.

She was surrounded by glass, like a greenhouse. She was wearing dark green hospital scrubs; wires were taped to her, and she screamed as she realized a drip was in her left arm. Holly ripped out the needle and felt a flare of pain. Why was she in the hospital? She couldn't see any obvious injuries.

As she got unsteadily to her feet, she noticed there were hundreds, if not thousands, of other people lying within glass boxes, surrounded by people in lab coats shouting and running around. Of course, the learn-in-your-sleep program she had volunteered for. Something must have gone wrong and she had woken up when she was meant to be learning Portuguese or something. Something was obviously wrong though. Holly gingerly made her way out and was stunned to see a wall of screens showing a war zone. Residents were evacuating as bombs rained down, shown from hundreds of different angles, with a whole host of data fluctuating in the corner of each screen. Holly felt an itch of recognition at some of the people she could see fleeing. Then she saw what was causing the disturbance in the lab.

A tall man with dark brown hair, wide shoulders, a tattoo on one arm, a prosthetic leg peeking out from under his green scrubs, and an angry expression was marching through the lab—eyes darting around wildly. She felt she knew him too. Then he locked eyes on her, smiled, and made a beeline toward her.

"Do you remember me?" he asked quietly amongst the surrounding pandemonium as security began piling in. Holly gave a small, uncertain nod as she racked her brains. Then he leaned forward and kissed her; he tasted of spices.

Her brain ached as memories collided, like the water from burst pipes comingling. She could simultaneously

remember her actual life and the dream simulation she had been forced to endure for the past four years. It was overwhelming but empowering to have both of her existences aware of each other.

"Brad," Holly breathed as he held her close.

"Come on, let's find Todd and wake him up. Then I think a few journalists and lawyers are going to want to hear our story."

Holly held his hand as they searched for Todd, starting their day together in reality as they often had in the simulation—with alarms blaring and watched by the programmers. They wouldn't be restarting it tomorrow.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the government's ethics in this story? Does it matter that (*most of*) the unwilling experiment participants would not remember the years of repeated trauma when they wake up? Does not-remembered trauma matter?
2. If the program in the story were real, would you volunteer for it to improve disaster responses? If not, is there some amount of money that might persuade you to do it? Does it matter that helping the program would potentially save future lives?
3. If the program in the story were real, and nobody was willing to participate, is there an alternative method (*like a lottery*) that you would support so the government could get the data it needs to save lives?
4. Which do you consider the greater immoral act in the story: putting people through repeated trauma or keeping them sedated for four years longer than promised?
5. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the likelihood of your government doing the same things the government in this story did? What is the basis for your score?

* * *

Fido Siddhartha

Roger Helms

* * *

Content Disclosure: None

* * *

Henry's mother, Valerie, sits frozen on our aging deck, staring at our son, unable to decide. I've said I will support her, no matter. He's my son, too, but my wife is the one who carried him for nine months twelve years ago.

"When was Fido—I mean Henry—first diagnosed?" asks Dr. Ellen.

"At age two," says Valerie. "They said somewhere on the autistic spectrum. But we could tell there was *something* much earlier."

Dr. Ellen looks at her notes. "So… has never talked, always plays alone, shows no interest in socializing, loves a single repetitive behavior, and arranges his toys in a certain pattern but doesn't really play with them."

"All true," says Valerie. "But he's always seemed content. He'd sometimes flip through the pages of picture books, but it

seemed the flipping, not the pictures, held his interest. He ate well, if picky, but he caused no trouble."

Valerie, a third-grade teacher, never gave up the notion she could turn Henry into a normal boy, despite doctors gently discouraging that thought, saying Henry was a particularly severe case. Henry has never resisted the many hugs and kisses his mother has given him, but he's never returned them. The soft words of love she speaks to him always seem unheard. Henry has never made a sound, save for crying, or short, wordless exclamations.

Dr. Ellen, as she prefers to be called, is forty, dressed casually in black slacks and a beige blouse. Her manner straddles clinical and personable. She complimented us on our backyard, which dovetails into a state forest with no fence in between. We've planted a small garden on one side, fruit trees on the other side, and lilac bushes around the deck. The lilacs' strong wafting sweetness floats around us on a summer breeze. Dr. Ellen took particular interest in our grafted dwarf apple tree.

"His socialization with the dog," she says, "is important. I've read my assistant's report, but I'd like to hear it from you."

"The main way," my wife replies, "is that they'd play fetch for hours at a time. Occasionally, the dog and Henry seemed to lock eyes, almost like lovers. The dog would lick Henry's face and Henry would lick the dog's face."

Dr. Ellen jots notes as she listens. Valerie and I believe she's sincerely interested in Henry's welfare, not just her research and treatment program. And it's not money. The treatments, funded by public and private sources, are free if your autistic child is accepted into her yearlong, intensive regimen. Henry has already been accepted, but Dr. Ellen

wanted—as did we—a personal visit. She's bringing papers for us to sign—liability forms and our permission.

Henry appears from the woods, streaking toward us with the stick in his mouth—actually a smooth, foot-long wooden baton. I know he's smiling, but you can't see that with his teeth clamped on the cylinder. He's always happy to find it, especially after throwing it deep enough into the forest that he can't see it. After the dog, his one pal, died, Henry began doing both the throwing and the fetching. He runs well, bounding deer-like.

Dr. Ellen watches Henry closely when he stops the fetch game for a moment, his attention drawn to the flowers on the lilac bushes. He always enjoys touching and smelling the blooms, fixated on them like it's the first time he ever saw such a thing. We planted them, the garden, and the fruit trees because it was recommended as a calming environment. We live in the country, no near neighbors. A big oak tree shades us from the mid-morning sun—if imperfectly since one of the oak's major branches came down in a recent storm. The high branch has been hauled away and the yard cleaned up, but the tree-sized limb's jagged stump, twenty feet up, still freshly gleams, revealing the tree's insides.

Henry soon bounds up the seven steps to the deck. He makes no eye contact and shows no interest in Dr. Ellen. He likes to throw from the deck—greater distance that way. He turns, cocks his arm, and throws the stick in a high arc. Bounding down the stairs, he hits the ground before it lands. Sometimes it goes so deep into the brushy woods he has trouble finding it, which he treats like a wonderful adventure. He's thrown and fetched the stick four times since Dr. Ellen first sat down.

Our son, our only child, was a beautiful infant, random

people commenting on how sweet he looked with his big deer-like brown eyes. But Henry never responded when people would coo at him. The bit of interest Henry returned—including to us—was just in his eyes, pointed at you yet blank.

"One concern we have," I say to Dr. Ellen, "is still not understanding how this treatment works despite your assistant's explanation."

"I found it hard to grasp when I first heard it theorized," says Dr. Ellen. "The key is that the *cause* of autism is unknown, but neuroscientists long ago determined the result is weak or missing connections in certain regions of the brain. With nanotechnology, we've been able to stimulate and nurture those weak or missing connections."

"But how," I ask, "do those nanobots work? And how are they made?"

"Well, understand that so-called nanobots are not tiny robots. They're formed by chemical processes, not microscopic assembly lines. It's easy to make billions of them—relatively speaking. The hard part is finding the right ingredients for a specific application. The ones we produce are essentially tiny spinning balls, spinning billions of times per second, each so tiny it takes a million of them to equal the width of a human hair."

"But," Valerie protests, "isn't that, like, introducing a foreign pathogen?"

"No. These nanobots don't destroy anything, and they don't reproduce. The body doesn't see them as invaders. Their only task is stimulating weak neural connections within the brain, which they do in a way we don't yet fully understand. But there are no negative side effects—and no outright *failures*. It's

just a question of how much they help. Sometimes it's only to a small degree, but sometimes it's *miraculous*."

Valerie raises a finger in further protest. "But your therapy also requires gene editing. Which sounds scary. Like playing God."

"Gene editing is now a proven, safe technology. We know what genes to edit to cure several genetic diseases. And my team has identified the genes responsible for making specific neural connections in the brain. Sometimes those genes just need to be switched on, but in cases like Henry's, the gene is missing. We're now able to splice another bit of DNA into adult stem cells and inject them, which opens the door for the nanobots."

Henry scampers back from the woods with the stick in his mouth, his head held high, eyes bright, if focused on nothing in particular.

"But to do that," I say, "you have to splice in *another person*'s genetic sequence, right?"

"A tiny bit, yes."

"But," I add, "there's only a tiny bit of DNA difference between apes and humans, right?"

"That's true, relatively speaking. But we are only dealing with a tiny bit of that tiny bit."

Henry shows no sign of understanding what we're saying as he jumps onto the deck again, turns, and throws the stick—a mighty throw this time—so deep into the woods we almost lose sight of him.

Valerie sucks in an uneasy breath. "Well, hearing that such splicing can cause major changes is scary—especially when it all happens at your special school. Being away from us is a real concern."

"I understand that, but you can visit whenever."

"Except," says Valerie, "we're two thousand miles away."

"I wish I could move closer, but I can't. A special, highly staffed environment is necessary because the rapid new connections in the brain create a need for individualized therapies. The rising new feelings in kids can be overwhelming. In Henry's case, for example, we would slowly extinguish his fixation on stick fetching, replacing it over time with more normal behavior, such as playing a game—at first alone then introducing another player. It's a time-consuming job that would overwhelm working parents like you."

"So when you say," Valerie says with a touch of sarcasm, "that Henry is a *perfect* candidate, that's what you say to all parents, right?"

"No. I do not. Please know my brother was autistic. Our mother always believed he was essentially locked inside his brain. So, I was drawn into this field to try to help my brother. But he was twenty-five by the time I started this endeavor, and it turns out, unfortunately, treatments must be done as a child or adolescent to be effective."

"And at twelve," I ask, "Henry is not already too old?"

"No, that's perfect. He's on the cusp of puberty when new neural connections are normally being made. And his gross motor skills, I can see, are normal, in contrast to many autistic children. And the relationship he developed with the dog is very promising. The miracles have tended to come from children who show relatively normal gross motor skills and who've developed a close relationship with a pet. So, I'd like to hear more about the dog now."

"Well, at age eight," says Valerie, "we got Henry a black-

and-white border collie that proved quiet and well-behaved but energetic. We named him *Too* because he rarely made a sound, just like Henry. They became pals, seemingly communicating by sight and mutual enthusiasm. Henry soon began smiling at Too, every moment with the dog like an opened Christmas present. Then came fetch."

Henry reappears with the stick. Dr. Ellen waves at him, I think as some test. Henry does not acknowledge the wave, no surprise, as he bounds back onto the deck. Valerie gets emotional telling the story, so she nods at me. "You tell her, John."

I squeeze my wife's hand before continuing. "When we introduced Henry and Too to fetch, it animated both. Henry loved throwing the stick, and Too loved tearing after it. Neither of them tired of it. The repetition even seemed to put both into a Nirvana-like state of happiness. We thus fostered it. When we let them play unrestricted, they'd play until Henry's arm got so tired it hung down—and Too would be panting so hard we thought he'd have a dog heart attack. He eventually did, but the vet said it was a congenital defect, not fetch."

Henry again cocks his arm, throws the stick, bounds noisily down the steps, and streaks after it.

"No strong interest in any other activity with the dog?" Dr. Ellen asks me.

"The one other thing they both liked was lying on their backs and having their tummies rubbed. They would lie beside each other, one of our hands on each tummy. Henry and Too would look at each other in seeming deep bliss. That's when we started calling Henry *Fido*."

"I know that sounds demeaning," Valerie says, "but we

meant it like *you're a good, happy boy*. We only say it when he seems extra blissful. He's always happy doing it, and we *think* he's happy most of the time."

"Perhaps half of all autistic children," Dr. Ellen says, "*are* happy despite not showing it in normal ways."

Henry finds the baton quickly. He streaks back with it in his teeth, bounding back onto the deck, turning, and throwing it again—this time extra hard, the spinning dark rod disappearing well into the woods. He dashes after it with wild enthusiasm.

"But when this dog died," Dr. Ellen says, looking over her notes, "you say it sent Henry into a deep depression. So you got a similar dog last year, but Henry ignored it."

"Totally," I say. "Because the new dog, which we named Hank, ignored the stick. Henry, however, soon tore off after it himself, like imitating Too in order to show Hank, even bringing it back in his teeth. That was initially cute, but then unsettling. Henry's depression, however, soon passed from fetching it by himself. Hank would just sit silently and watch Fido—Henry—play. The dog even seemed to watch the fetching with disdain. Henry kept trying, even pushing the dog toward the stick. But Hank didn't like it—some dogs don't. That frustrated Henry, so we gave the dog away."

Henry has now completely disappeared into the forest, making Valerie stand and crane her neck to see him.

"So," says Dr. Ellen, "he will keep playing fetch as much as you let him?"

"Yes," I say. "He'll rest when tired or to touch the lilacs but just for a few minutes. And he keeps getting bigger and stronger, throwing it into the woods where we sometimes can't even see him—like now. There's nothing dangerous in the woods, and

he's shown no sign of wandering further, but we go after him if out of sight for more than a minute or two."

Henry soon appears, streaking through the yard, stick in his mouth, eyes lit up with joy. He again bounds up the deck, stops, cocks his arm, and throws. The baton hits a tree branch and falls back into the yard, but he's not disappointed. Wherever the stick lands he loves to fetch it.

"He always brings it back in his teeth," says Valerie. "So, we got the special stick you see. We wash it all the time with antibacterial soap. He'll sometimes take a few minutes to find the stick, but the longer it takes him to find it the happier he seems."

"But with us both working," I add, "we can often only watch him now and then. Henry goes to a special school—more like a day care to us, which he seems to not mind, or at least tolerate."

"If we don't let him fetch enough when we're all here," Valerie says, "he'll refuse to eat—like a hunger strike. So, we always set aside time for it. But sometimes he just keeps fetching, not eating, so we've started feeding him a bite of dinner after each fetch, like treats."

Dr. Ellen smiles wistfully, watching Henry quickly come back with the stick in his mouth.

"Some parents," I say, "reported that for those around puberty, the changes are especially profound. Right?"

"True. That's a time of normal changes, so the combination of nanotechnology and gene therapy accelerates the changes—physical as well as emotional and cognitive."

Henry has paused to catch his breath, dropping the stick and panting. But just seconds later, he picks it up again, turns,

throws, and dashes away.

"It sounds like the rapid changes," I say, "are a lot for the kids to deal with even after they leave the program. Right?"

"True. That's why we have follow-up therapy. Some require only monthly visits and some weekly. A few, however, have needed a return to the residency program. Most normal teenagers, I might observe, could use weekly therapy and don't get it."

"But the long-term is unknown," says Valerie.

"Well, we are starting to get some data there. Our first experimental patients graduated—as we think of it—nine years ago. While there've been varying degrees of improvement, we've seen no—well—bad or unexpected changes. Some subjects have shown only small improvements, but one boy is now going to college, living in a dorm, and he had a girlfriend for a while. The breakup reason seems to have been a *normal* thing."

Henry returns again with the stick. We go silent, watching him drop it again. The dog—Too—would often look at us like *I did it* or with eyes that said *throw it again*. But Henry looks only at the stick, the object of his affection. He soon picks it up and throws it. He never tires of it—happy, even blissful as I interpret him.

"So," Valerie asks, "do you really think he's a candidate for a miracle?"

"Yes. He's just the sort of case where we see the most dramatic improvement. But I don't want to make assurances—there can be none. I do assure you there *will* be improvement, just not what or how much. And I would never dream of pressuring anyone into signing. So… I'll let you two talk it over

while I make some calls in my car."

Valerie and I watch Henry's fetching in silence. The seemingly endless repetition eventually reminded me of Siddhartha in the Herman Hesse novel. After struggling to find happiness in "normal" ways, both material and spiritual, Hesse's Siddhartha found enlightenment rowing a ferry across a river, over and over and over, escaping from life's sufferings. I've thus occasionally thought of Henry as "Fido Siddhartha," wondering if he is experiencing a state of perfect bliss throwing the stick over and over and over.

Both I and his mother were initially excited without reservations about Dr. Ellen—until we heard from other parents. Those who saw small improvements were not disappointed. They were happy to see *some* positive changes. It was the most successfully treated kids—the miracles—that were unsettling to parents, who often used the word *spooky*.

Dr. Ellen encouraged us to video-interview parents, which we did and recorded. One mother confessed *she* now needed therapy to cope with the changes in her son, who started being treated at eleven. Two parents in particular deeply affected Valerie, who has rewatched the interviews many times.

She now wants to view those two one more time, loading them on her laptop. She clicks ahead to the heart of the interviews.

"Where is my son?" the first woman wails, her anguish palpable, tears falling. "It's like he's someone else's son. And the way this gene therapy works, he partially *is* someone else's son. Our son was in his own world, yes, but he was happy and safe and worry-free. Now he's depressed because he's developing normal interests, like interest in girls. But he's as yet so awkward

and behind that he frightens other kids—to the point he's had to go back to Dr. Ellen's special school, meaning he doesn't even get to come back and visit us that often. He used to sit by himself and be happy—or at least not sad. But when he visits now, he's moody and can't seem to make decisions—if insisting he *wants* to make them. And his voice, which we'd never heard, is like a stranger's voice. And when people find out he's been *gene fixed*, they think it's somehow *artificial*—like our son is a Frankenstein. So, I cry more than ever, worrying he'll always be lonely—and will have trouble trusting anyone. He doesn't even trust *us*. The worst day of my life was when he recently started crying and asked me why I did this to him."

Valerie loads the second mother's report—her son having started treatment at twelve. They were poor and couldn't afford to visit their son at the special school. They heard he was developing miraculously, so they decided to wait and see him when he finally came home, thinking it would be like seeing a lame child suddenly fully healed, a moment of great joy.

"Well," says the mother, "our son was supposed to tell us when he was coming but he either forgot or thought it would be nice to come unannounced. Someone from the school escorted him and let him out at the curb, at first just watching as he rang the doorbell. Well, when we answered the door, we had no idea who he was. When he tried to tell us he was our son, we thought it was a scam. When he tried to come into the house, we nearly called the police until I finally saw that, yes, he *was* our son. It was like not seeing him since he was a child—then seeing one of those missing child pictures that try to show what they would look like after several years of aging. Except this was no picture. We apologized like crazy, but our initial reaction made him so

depressed he says he feels like an orphan, and he now says he's contemplated suicide. So, I cry harder than I ever did back when I wanted him to be normal. I mean, I love him, but it's like he's not who I gave birth to, like the son I gave birth to is dead."

Valerie closes the laptop and looks at Henry, now pausing again to touch and smell the lilacs, their scent mixing with his sweat. We'd like to ask Henry how he feels about the therapy, but we can't. He wouldn't understand until after receiving treatment.

Sometimes when Valerie has rubbed Henry's belly, he's looked over to see if Too is there, getting his belly rubbed, and the empty space clearly makes him sad. His mother and I want that empty space filled in our son's life. We've considered trying another dog, but that strikes us as like *home day care*. We want the miracle, but we fear it as much as we want it. Will he one day ask, *Why did you do this to me*?

Valerie's tears tell me she is still unable to make that decision. In putting the decision on her, am I just palming off the weight of it?

We sit watching Henry play fetch by himself, happy, even blissful, like rowing that ferry back and forth. Is our son achieving a state of simple bliss that anyone would love to experience? It's clear he would struggle to regain that bliss, especially if he became one of the miracles.

"This is *our* son, Henry," says Valerie, hugging me while looking at him. "He is what he is. He's what God gave us. He's happy. But…"

She buries her face into my shoulder. I hug her while looking at Fido Siddhartha, so untroubled by our trouble.

Dr. Ellen comes back from her car, carrying the

paperwork.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. It is wrong to change Henry to be more normal at the risk of him no longer being blissfully happy? Is his being "normal," or a contributing member of society more important than his being happy?
2. Should emotional and financial strains on the family be a consideration when deciding if Henry should undergo the procedure? What should the deciding factors be in making the decision?
3. Would it matter if Henry was autistic but functionally neurotypical? Does the severity of his autism matter in your decision-making process? What level of function might make you change your decision and why?
4. If you agreed for Henry to undergo the procedure and he later asked, "Why did you do this to me?" what would your answer be?
5. If you could trade places with Henry and live in a state of perfect happiness chasing a stick, would you do it? If you were Henry's parents, would you authorize the procedure? What if there was a risk the procedure would, over time, wear off, and he would return to his original state?

* * *

The Fortune Teller

Harman Burgess

* * *

Content Disclosure: Strong Language; Graphic Violence; Supernatural Themes

* * *

My head has a liquid feel to it as I stumble down the street. The bottle of red wine in my belly is making it seem like my limbs have become balloons, and at any moment, they might float away. Next to me, Michael has a stupid whiskey grin stretched across his face, making it look all bloated and red. I know this is going to hurt in the morning, but right now I couldn't feel finer.

"…an' tha's the crux o' the matter, yer see?" says Michael as he narrowly avoids a collision with a telegraph pole. "The past ain't really exist. Ya feel? Go get me histery, would ya? Go fine me a Caesar an' 'ave him explain the intrakacies o' his Gallic expeditions. Yer cain't do it!"

I nod slowly to myself as the contents of what he's saying dissolve in my mind. "I get it, I do. What about his

commentaries, though? Didn't he write some grand propaganda about Gaul? That's Caesar, in a way."

"But yer reed them propagandas in the present, see? It's not like he's in the room with ya, lookin' over yer shoulder."

"True, true," I say. "Michael, my friend, I do believe we've just discovered presentism."

"Tha' the fancy philosophical term fer it?"—cars blur past the sidewalk, streams of light in the darkness—"See, why waste thousan's an' thousan's in HIGHER EDUCATION if yer can just *talk*? Yer should be doin' engineerin' like me. Not philosophy. I sa—"

Michael's discourse on the current state of tertiary schooling is cut short as he trips over a letterbox and sprawls on the sidewalk in a mess of limbs and pain. It seems unreal, somehow, and I can't help but laugh like I'm watching an absurd form of slapstick. Michael groans from his position on the ground, and I realize he might actually be hurt.

"You okay, mate?" I ask, bending down to help him.

"I'm good, ya bugga. Get yer bleedin' hands off of me!"—he picks himself up and dusts himself off—"Poor plannin' that is. Puttin' a fuggin' letterbox there, where innocent drunks could hurt thimselves on."

"Oh, yeah?" I ask, eager to continue our debate. "Whose plan?"

Michael strikes a pose and declares: "Jee-suhs!" Which sends him into hysterics.

"Come on, you alko."

We continue our ramble down the street, a symphony of cicadas and tire screeches for accompaniment. The air hangs hot and humid around us; the windows of the town houses we

walk past have their blinds pulled down. It has always seemed to me that these hours—the ones between one and four a.m.—should've been called twilight; the word suits this time much better.

"Oi!" calls Michael from up ahead of me. "Check out this place!"

He gestures to a purple shop, all plaster gold and tacky trimmings. A sign on the jutting multicolored awning reads MADAME TIME, FORTUNE TELLING & TAROT AT AFFORDABLE PRICES! There is a painting on the front of the shop, a large autumn mural with wispy shadows of girls dancing in the shade of yellow trees. A neon sign flashes OPEN from behind the purple glass door.

Suddenly earnest, Michael leans into me. "Le's git our fortunes red."

"I thought you didn't believe in the future."

"Tha' were ages ago, this is now. Come on, it'll be fun."

"Sure, but you're paying."

Michael punches my shoulder and leads the way inside.

* * *

I push past the plastic strips behind the purple door and enter the shop. The first thing that hits me is the smell: deep, thick perfume seeping from every corner of the room, making me want to sneeze. Next, the rows and rows of tacky trinkets, playing cards, crystal balls, and so on. Curios of the Christmas cracker variety, no doubt marked up outrageously to seem more reliable. A veil of beads marks out a back area and a contralto voice drifts out from behind it.

"I've been expecting you two."

"Bet you say that to all the girls," I reply.

Michael shoots me a look and steps toward the beads. “Can yer tell us our futures?”

“Come closer and find out.”

But as we approach, the veil of beads takes on an ominous glow. Perhaps it’s the drink, but I feel an incredible sense of wrongness emanating from behind that veil; a palpable hostility, the kind of predatory malice that separates a wolf from a puppy. I don’t want to go in there; I feel my intoxication wash away as adrenaline makes me keenly aware of each passing second. But Michael has already gone through the veil, so, reluctantly, I follow him—keeping an eye on the exit.

Inside the backroom is night, a crystal ball shines dimly on a small wooden table failing to illuminate anything. The walls are cushiony drapes of spiderweb silk, the other side of the table is completely black. The perfume in here is thick enough to choke on. There’s a rattle from the blackness like heavy jewelry or perhaps chains, and a purple-gloved hand emerges, gesturing to the two plastic chairs waiting for us.

“Are yer Mah-dame Time?” Michael asks as we sit.

“I’m Madame Time, yes,” says the contralto voice. Up close it sounds raspy and hoarse, as if its owner is being suffocated by sawdust.

“That the name your parents gave you?” I ask.

“Jon!” objects Michael. “Yer ruinin’ the vibe.”

“I don’t mind, Michael,” says Madame Time. “We’re friends here. Madame Time was my stage name at the Pandemonium Carnival, my first job. Partly because of my knowledge of Time. I live it completely, hence the nickname. I’m rather fond of it.”

“Tell us,”—Michael leans forward in his seat—“How’s

Time work?"

Madame Time gives a contralto chuckle that makes gooseflesh bubble across my skin. Michael, on the other hand, laughs along with her. She *knows* something, this 'Madame Time,' something awful. I wish I hadn't let Michael drag me in here.

"Very well," says the fortune teller. "It's like this: the present, as you know it, the here and now, the endless today—does not exist. Not as you understand it. Instead, it is made up of lots of little moments of the past. Building and building and crashing down on us like a wave, bearing us into the future whether we like it or not. Cause and effect, my friends."

"Oh, so just your basic determinism, then?" I say. "What you're getting at?"

"Wha's tha'?" asks Michael. "De-term-in-ism?"

"The idea that humans aren't in control of their actions. That in reality our behavior is determined by past causes out of our control."

"Yes!" says Madame Time. I hear the smile in her voice and dislike it; I don't want to be associated with anything that could make *her* smile. "For example, say, Michael, you are hungry. You go down to a café and buy a hamburger. The cause is hunger, and the effect is that you get lunch. Very basic example, but I'm sure you can see the workings of cause and effect and apply them to everything else. And by investigating a person's past for causes, I can make absolute predictions about their future."

"How the hell do you do that?" I ask.

The fortune teller runs a hand across the crystal ball (I hear her jewelry rattle), the light bending and refracting like

mini rainbows beneath her glove. “Magic.”

“Do me!” says Michael. “I wanna know me causes.”

“With pleasure,” says Madame Time. “However, the process is rather taxing, and I need something to replenish my energy… ten dollars a future.”

Michael, without hesitation, brings out his wallet. It’s empty. He looks to me with the sad eyes of a Dickens orphan and I let him stew for a couple of moments. Then, I get out my wallet and slide a twenty-dollar bill onto the table. I don’t *want* to get a future per se, but something is whispering in my mind that if I don’t get one, I’ll regret it. Michael claps me on the back and promises to buy me a beer later. I smile and add it to the few dozen others he owes me.

“Thank you,”—the glove rattles out of the darkness and takes the twenty, leaving two sealed envelopes in its place—“Your fortunes.”

“I thou—”

She interrupts me. “Please, I wouldn’t be much of a fortune teller if I couldn’t predict my customers now, would I? I made them earlier.”

Michael reaches for the envelope with his name on it and goes to open it.

“Ah, ah, ah,” says the fortune teller. “They haven’t finished fermenting yet. You can’t open them until tomorrow or else the magic will escape.”

So *that’s* her ploy. Spew a bunch of crap about Time then palm off any suckers dumb enough to buy it with fortune cookie vagaries. I admit, it’s clever, but something deeper warns me to be careful, that it couldn’t possibly be that simple. Pocketing my future (I can’t just leave it there), I pull Michael to his feet.

"It's been a pleasure," I say. "But it's getting late, you know…"

"Of course," says Madame Time. "Come again sometime; bring a friend, even. The more the merrier."

"See ya!" yells Michael as I frog march him out of the shop.

There's a taxi driving by outside and I flag it down, paying to send Michael home before he notices any other strange shops. Relieved, I watch the taillights of the car disappear before hurrying back to my apartment. The shadows seem darker than before, the streets devoid of traffic. The moon hangs in the sky like a crack den lightbulb, passing in and out of the clouds.

I feel relief wash over me as I turn the key in my front door and slip into the apartment. Depositing the envelope on my hallstand with my keys and wallet, I crash into bed without bothering to take my clothes off.

Sleep takes a long time to arrive.

* * *

Pain.

Angry, vengeful pain.

And at the same time an intense sluggishness, like I'm still drunk but without any of the fun perks of intoxication.

So, tired and in pain, I stumble out of bed and into the kitchen. Moving dirty dishes and empty takeout boxes out of the way, I put the kettle on and try to remember how to make coffee. No, that's not it. Isn't caffeine bad for you when you're hungover? I hunt through the kitchen cabinets for some aspirin. Nothing. Great. I settle on tea (with five sugars) instead and collapse on the couch. I turn the TV on, muting the sound, and a clock in the corner of the news broadcast informs me it's four

o'clock in the afternoon.

Brilliant.

I notice the date by the clock: shit, it's Monday! I'm meant to be in a goddamn lecture right now. I jump up to get ready and my head spins violently. Ah, screw it, I'll catch up some other time. Settling back on the couch, I sip my tea and wait as cognitive thought reasserts its hold on my brain. *Did I go to a fortune teller's last night?* The thought recalls images of sinister darkness and empty malice. I look over to the hallstand and, sure enough, the letter is where I left it. Summoning the energy to stand, I go over and pick it up; each muscle movement causing ripples of fire to trickle through my nervous system. Envelope secure, I sit back down and open it up. Perfume wafts off the pink, cursive handwriting:

Jon,

Michael is going to kill you. Now that I've got your attention, here's why: he thinks you are the reincarnated spirit of his abusive stepfather. Crazy, right? That's schizophrenia for you. He'll stab you to death unless you stop him.

Best,

Madame Time

P.S. In case you don't believe me, enclosed is another prediction pro bono. Hint: unmute your TV.

A cream-colored bit of folded paper falls out of the envelope. I open it and see it's a transcript of some kind of interview. Something about farming or whatever. I turn the volume on my TV up and hear the blond news anchor say:

"…now, we go to J. D.'s interview with the Minister of Agriculture about the recent droughts. J. D.? Over to you."

The picture cuts to two men in business suits talking

about water restrictions. And every word, even the impromptu jokes and banter, is recorded verbatim on the sheet. *Every single word.* I finish watching the interview in awestruck silence. How the hell did she know what they were going to say? A contralto voice answers: *cause and effect.*

No.

Could it?

No.

But the possibility?

The possibility would mean the fortune teller is right about determinism. That my thoughts and feelings are as inconsequential as a mirage, as truthful as fiction. The products of random events far beyond my control. No, I don't want to believe that. I *choose* not to believe that. But is that choice nothing but the effect of some long-forgotten cause, some innate biological predilection for control?

My phone rings, shattering my thoughts and reawakening my headache. "Jon, speaking."

"Stepfather?

"Michael!"

The line goes dead. I remember the note and go cold. *Michael is going to kill you.* I don't like this; I don't like any of this. I don't like that she predicted the interview. And I certainly don't like the slant in Michael's voice. I don't like what it says about cause and effect… oh, stuff that. I don't have time to consider this right now. Grabbing my keys, I jog out of my apartment.

* * *

The air is pale as I stumble toward the bus stop, the sun straining against the blue clouds covering the sky but failing to break through, making the world look as though it's underwater.

Thoughts churn like whirlpools in my mind: anxiety about Michael, fear of what the fortune teller told him, desperate ideas trying to reject the proof she gave to determinism, and on and on, over and over until I reach the bus stop. Distracting myself with checking the timetable, I find the bus to Michael's place and scan the times… good. The next one is only a couple minutes away. I pace up and down, trying to keep my brain in check. I imagine the problem in Michael's accented drawl:

"…yer see, mate, the problem is,"—in my imagination, Michael pauses to belch—"Ah, Christ… yer know if this de-term-in-ism thing is true, tha' means yer exitsense ain't mean nutin'. Wha' was tha' Russian ya toll me 'bout the other day goin' on 'bout. *If there's no God, everythin's permitted*. Seems ter me tha' the secon' part applies, call it Jon's law: *if yer don't control yer actions, everythin's permitted.* Quite a dilemah, ya feel?"

The bus comes rumbling up to the stop and I get on. The ticket machine is broken, so the driver nods me forward without me having to pay. Leaning my head against the cool window, I watch as the suburban landscape blurs past. The second part of Michael's question is interesting. The average undergraduate could, no doubt, come up with a dozen reasons why life is meaningful and no, not everything is permitted. But when confronted with *proof*, concrete proof in the form of the fortune teller's letter, what then? Take refuge in The Divine, take that leap of faith, and join Kierkegaard's crusade against logic? No. There's a reason *He's* called the First Cause. That would do nothing to refute the idea; it only assumes that the whole process must be good. And I don't think assumptions are what is needed right now.

"Hey mate," says the bus driver. "This your stop?"

I look out and see the granny flat Michael rents (it's hidden behind a largish family house, but I've been there enough to spot it) flashing past as the bus rolls to a stop.

"Yeah," I stand and walk toward the exit. "Thanks, man."

"Big night?"

"Something like that."

I hear the driver laugh as the bus pulls away from the curb with a pneumatic hiss. Time balloons as I walk up the driveway to the flat, each crunch of gravel beneath my shoe a symphonic crash in my mind. I see Michael's car parked outside, which is a good sign. He almost never goes anywhere without it, so he's probably in. I press the doorbell and wait. Nothing.

"Michael!"—I pound on the screen door—"Hey, buddy, you awake in there?"

There's *still* no response. I try the handle, it's unlocked. Careful not to make any noise, I push the door open and peek inside. The lights are off, and everything's peaceful inside the kitchen/dining area that is the flat's main room. I tiptoe in and sneak a look into the living room. The TV is on (playing the news, of all things) but there's no sign of Michael. Stepping further in, straining my eyes against the darkness, I feel something cold enter my shoulder. The coldness glances off my collarbone and flicks down my back. Turning around, I see Michael holding a kitchen knife, the blade dripping red.

"W-w-w-w-wha'?" I stammer, my brain not comprehending what it sees.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I had ter, ya see? I had ter. The note said so."

Darkness gathers in the corner of my mind and I feel an awful leaking sensation in my shoulder. I put my hand on the

wall to steady myself, and Michael goes forward to help me but stops. Pulling the fortune teller's letter out of my pocket I throw it toward where I think Michael is standing.

"One of these notes, then?"

There's silence and a black shadow that looks like Michael bends down to read the note. I slide against the wall, my consciousness becoming increasingly hard to hold on to. It's like I'm caught in the orbit of a black hole.

"Oh, mah God!" yells Michael, but his voice is distant. "God, Jon! Stay with me…"

But the echoes of his voice are lost as I fall into the slow timelessness of eternity.

* * *

Time dribbles by in different shades of shadow.

Pulsating darkness fills my mind.

Thoughts balloon like soap bubbles, swirling and fading and drifting away from me… I can feel something shift in the corner of my consciousness. The ripples of its movement reverberating through my brain.

I can feel it… an Other, something not me. Caressing the edges of my soul, *feeding* off my emotions: fear of the finest vintage, betrayal richer than chocolate; everything, in short, that makes me, *me*.

I scream, but no sound comes out. The Other seems to enjoy it more, the emotion. The food. Gathering my strength, I push against it. But it digs tighter into my brain, holding fast.

I push harder, giving everything I have to one desperate shove. Knowing intrinsically that if I fail and *it* remains, then I am lost.

And with a wet sucking noise, the Other is pushed from

my mind. There's a distant scream as it flails into whatever void it came from and light fills my mind… my eyes flick open and gasping—

* * *

—gasping! I claw at the leather of Michael's couch, my limbs as rigid as a corpse's, my mind filled with swirling, psychedelic light.

"Jon!" calls Michael from very near.

I let myself go limp and run a hand across my temple as reality swerves violently into focus. I'm lying down, bandages are wrapped tightly around my shoulder, the leaking sensation is gone. Then comes memory: I see Michael holding a knife, feel him stab me, and then the realization that the Other is gone forever. That last one fills me with peace, as slowly the violence inside me subsides to a dull throb. Michael is crouched by the sofa, a damp cloth in his hand, eyes full of concern.

"You stabbed me," I say. It is not accusatory, but merely stating a fact. Like a schoolchild giving a history report.

Michael's face slumps as he looks away. "I'm sorry. There's a reason. Not a good 'un, nowhere near a good 'un. But it's there."

He presses a sheet of paper into my hand. Sitting up on the couch, I stare at the neat, pink handwriting, the words forming themselves into meaning before me:

Michael,

There's a prediction enclosed that will show you I mean business. Turn your TV to the Channel 6 News. Done that? Good. There's a transcript enclosed that will prove I'm for real. Watch the news with the transcript. Done that? Great. Now an unpleasantness, Jon wants to kill you. Here's how you can prove it for yourself: 1) call him up and say

the word "Stepfather" 2) if he comes looking for you that means you're in danger 3) should he enter your flat, kill him. Good luck.

Ciao,

Madame Time

I let go of the note and feel the fortune teller's spell over us fade. An incredible feeling of violation coming over me. She played us. She played us *good*. I recall the presence I felt while unconscious and shudder. That has to mean something, it's too much of a coincidence for it not to be. And then the pieces fall together in my mind, and I understand just what's happened.

"… a *b'ich*," says Michael, and I realize he's been talking the entire time. "A no good, con artistin' *b'ich*."

"Calm down," I say. "We've got more important things to worry about than being angry. I know her plan. I worked it out, just then."

"Don't keep it ter yerself then!"

"I'm getting to it! Give me the chance to speak, why don't ya?"—Michael grins sheepishly and makes a gesture zipping his lips—"You see, she lures people in and gets them all worked up about nothing. Got you worked up enough to stab me! And then she *feeds* off the resulting emotion. I felt her doing it when I was unconscious. All the while keeping us unbalanced with a philosophy of pessimism; hand-tailored to make us feel powerless. And she'll keep on feeding and feeding. Unless we do something."

Michael begins to object but stops. The idea has a perverse kind of logic to it, and if she can predict a news interview and a stabbing, doesn't that just show I'm right? He opens his mouth again: "How der we stop her?"

"Simple," I say. "We go over to her little shop and kick the

ever-loving shit out of her until she's too scared to even dream about us. Sound good?"

A grin stretches across Michael's face. Sitting there, smiling like that, he strikes me like a stone gargoyle about to break free from its pedestal and commit some heinous act. And what he says next is like medicine to my aching head:

"It does, my friend, tha' soun's ab-so-lute-lee *beautiful*."

* * *

The setting sun is amber fire in the pale sky, caressing us as we make our way toward Madame Time's shop. A mother and daughter pair cross the road to avoid us and I'm not surprised; with my shoulder wrapped tightly in bandages and the size of Michael's crowbar, I bet we look exactly like the type of people parents warn their children about. And that feels *good*. We stop outside the shop's autumn mural, and Michael touches my arm.

"We really doin' this?" he asks.

I open the glass door for him. "Absolutely."

Michael goes into the shop, and I follow behind him. The now-familiar smell of perfume washes over me. The same sense of wrongness drifts from the backroom, but I'm ready for it. I *know* what it represents, nothing more dangerous than a mosquito.

"I've been expect—" comes the contralto voice, but it is cut off by Michael hurling his crowbar through the veil. It flashes in the sparkling light and *thuds* into the back wall with a satisfying crunch.

"Ya wanna fug with me?" yells Michael, sweeping merchandise off the shelves in huge haymaker swings.

I flip the sign on the door to CLOSED as Michael begins tearing apart the shop.

"How did you do that thing with the TV?" I call into the backroom as Michael overturns a rack of playing cards.

"Come closer," is the reply, more evenly than I'd expect given the circumstances. "Find out for yourself."

I part the veil of beads and step through, Michael still raging through the shop like a Spanish bull. The perfume congeals in the air as I draw closer to the dark corner; the crowbar is resting on the table next to the crystal ball. A purple glove motions me to sit, and I can hear the fortune teller's jewelry rattle. Sitting down, I say,

"Well, explain yourself!"

"I *know* you," says Madame Time. "I've *eaten* you, Jon. Your fears, your hopes, your dreams…"

A shiver goes down my spine like she's walking on my grave. There's a rattling sound as Madame Time leans into the light. And the vision that presents itself to me is one of pure nightmare:

The fortune teller's face is that of a corpse's left out in the heat for too long; the skin brown and leathery, cracked in places, and the eyes empty sockets of shadow. Perfume reeks from her body, there's a rusty chain reaching from her neck into the darkness—folding under her purple carnival robes. There's a flutter of beads behind me. I turn to see Michael—fresh from destroying the shop—sprinting outside, his face moon white.

"Look at me!" commands the fortune teller, her voice acid bitter. "You people have it so good out there and you don't even know it! Running around, dreaming of free will and all that crap. *Maybe if I'm a good boy, my boss will give me a pay rise!* You are caught in a long line of dominoes stretching back to eternity and forward to the end of Time. Nothing about you is real. You are

nothing. Less than a shadow"—she leans back as her voice softens, and I feel my anger dissipate as I begin to understand her—"I've always seen it. *Always.* Kind of like watching a movie of myself: I see this person, me, going around doing things, but I don't have any control over her. I didn't write those futures, Jon. Something else did. Someone else. I only watched the world butterfly around you and fed on your confusion. I *saw* it, but I didn't *do* it. My only sin is that of hunger, nothing else."

My anger fades completely, she's just the same as us, really. Only without the imagination to do anything about it. I have no desire to fight her anymore. Standing, I go over to the beads. Thinking of something clever to say, a final quip, I turn around. But the backroom and the fortune teller and everything are gone; borne away on some magic tide. I turn back to the main shop, but that's gone too. The tacky trinkets and gaudy tricks replaced by construction tape and garbage. A FOR SALE sign hangs on the plain glass door. Outside, where Michael is looking in, the storefront is black and crumply.

"Now wha'?" asks Michael as I step out.

I crack my back and think for a moment. "Don't know about you, but I could sure go for a drink right now."

Michael nods and we walk away from the remains of the shop in silence. Each of us preoccupied with our memories, trying to fit something impossible into the confines of reality. Time passes.

"Der ya think she was right 'bout tha' de-term-in-ism stuff?" says Michael.

"I don't know," I say. "I may never know. But if you really want to know what I think? It doesn't matter. Maybe the *appearance* of choice is choice enough. If you *think* you're doing

something for a reason, then maybe you are."

"Huh," says Michael. We continue in silence for some more. "Ya think she'll come back fer us?"

"I don't think so. I think we humiliated her enough that despite what she may feel, she couldn't bear to show her face to us again. And she turned out to be relatively harmless, in the end. An old leech and nothing more. Maybe the next people she feeds on will finish her off for good. I don't know. But I kind of get the feeling she has to be there, you know? If it weren't her, it'd be something else. Maybe something worse."

Michael shudders at the prospect of something worse than the fortune teller. We come to a stop outside our usual pub. I go to head inside, but Michael grabs my arm. "Can I ask yer somtin' sirious, mate?"

"Sure."

"I left me wallet at home. Can yer stand me some cash?"

And the customers and staff inside the pub look out to see the source of the broad, smiling laughter: two friends chuckling to each other, happy, encased in a golden moment of Time.

* * *

This story is a part of our legacy-of-excellence program, first printed in the After Dinner Conversation—July 2021 issue.

Discussion Questions

1. Jon says at the end of the story, regarding determinism, "…the *appearance* of choice is choice enough." Do you agree? Does it not matter if determinism is real or not?
2. In the story, they mention the phrase from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, which says, "If there is no God, everything is permitted." What does this phrase mean? What does it mean in the framework of determinism? Do you agree with this statement?
3. Is it possible to believe in cause-and-effect relationships and still believe in free will? How?
4. Is the fortune teller evil? Does she deserve to be abused? What in the story supports your opinion?
5. The exact transcription from the television was enough to convince both men the remainder of the letter was legitimate. Would that be enough to convince you the fortune teller was real and cause you to take the same actions as Jon and Michael?

* * *

Author Information

The Lie and the Confessional

Marie Hanna Curran is a graduate of equine science from UL; however, her time is now spent writing. Her poetry has appeared in magazines, journals, and her poetry book *Observant Observings* (Tayen Lane Publishing). Her nonfiction has appeared in the *Irish Independent* and *Irish Examiner*. She can be found on her blog *www.solongasicanbreathe.wordpress.com*

The King and I

A. A. Kostas is an Australian-Canadian writer of poetry, fiction, essays, and reviews. He works as a lawyer and is currently based in Singapore. He writes "Waymarkers," a newsletter focused on spirituality and philosophy on Substack *@aakostas*

The Levitation of Mrs. Caruso

Lyon Kennedy grew up outside Philadelphia as the eleventh of thirteen children, with ten brothers. He graduated from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia with a B.A. in English and spent five years in Germany teaching English. He's worked as a technical writer in the New York City area for over twenty years. He now lives in the Hudson Valley, two hours north of the city.

Baby All Gone

Dena Pruett lives and writes in Birmingham, AL. She holds a Master of Arts in English from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from the Mississippi University for Women. Instagram *@denapruett*; *www.denapruett.com*

Guinea Pigs

Yvonne Lang's work has been featured in a range of publications from *Your Cat Magazine* to *Sirens Call*, as well as ranking highly in competitions. Her flash has featured on Trembling with Fear, *101 Words*, and *Fairfield Scribes*. Her work has been published in anthologies by *CaféLit*, Knight Writing Press, Three Cousins Publishing, Black Hare Press, and *Schlock!* with her debut horror novelette featuring as part of Demain's Short Sharp Shock! series. She resides in Yorkshire with her husband and an opinionated cat where she writes bizarre stories and weird tales. *www.yvonnelang.co.uk*

Fido Siddhartha

Roger Helms has been a journalist, newspaper editor, and technical writer. His fiction has appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*, *Fabula Argentea*, *CaféLit*, *Bewildering Stories*, and other publications. X (Twitter) *@RWHelmsWriter*

The Fortune Teller

Harman Burgess studies literature at the University of Newcastle, Australia. In his spare time, he writes and enjoys hanging out with friends. His short fiction has previously been published, or is forthcoming, in numerous magazines and anthologies including *Cosmic Horror Monthly* and *The Horror Zine.*

Additional Information

Reviews

If you enjoyed reading these stories, please consider doing an online review. It's only a few seconds of your time, but it is very important in continuing the series. Good reviews mean higher rankings. Higher rankings mean more sales and a greater ability to release stories.

Print Books

https://www.afterdinnerconversation.com

Purchase our growing collection of print anthologies, "Best of," and themed print book collections. Available from our website, online bookstores, and by order from your local bookstore.

Podcast Discussions/Audiobooks

https://www.afterdinnerconversation.com/podcastlinks

Listen to our podcast discussions and audiobooks of After Dinner Conversation short stories on Apple, Spotify, or wherever podcasts are played. Or, if you prefer, watch the podcasts on our YouTube channel or download the .mp3 file directly from our website.

Patreon

https://www.patreon.com/afterdinnerconversation

Get early access to short stories and ad-free podcasts. New supporters also get a free digital copy of the anthology *After Dinner Conversation–Season One*. Support us on Patreon!

Book Clubs/Classrooms

https://www.afterdinnerconversation.com/book-club-downloads

After Dinner Conversation supports book clubs! Receive free short stories for your book club to read and discuss!

Social

Connect with us on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Bluesky, TikTok, Substack, and X (Twitter.)

Special Thanks

After Dinner Conversation gratefully acknowledges the support of the following individuals and organizations.

* * *

In Alphabetical Order

Anonymous, Marie Anderson, DB Babak, Ria Bruns, Brett Clark, Jarvis Coffin, Rebecca Dueben, Tina Forsee, Deb Gain-Braley, David Gibson, Mercedes Holmes, Ron Koch, Sandra Kolankiewicz, Donna Lormand, Rena Ong, Anja Peerdeman, John Sheirer, David Shultz, Frank Strada, Mitchell Sweet, Annie Thompson, and Bill Weston.

After Dinner Conversation is supported in part by the Arizona Commission on the Arts, which receives support from the State of Arizona and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ARIZONA COMMISSION ON THE ARTS

* * *

Donation Information

Please send your 501(c)(3) donations to:
After Dinner Conversation
2516 S. Jentilly Lane, Tempe, AZ 85282
https://www.afterdinnerconversation.com/donation
https://www.patreon.com/afterdinnerconversation

[Page Left Intentionally Blank]